

one to whom the ancestors had entrusted the health and prosperity of the family holdings. Thus the well-being of the group took precedence over that of any individual member, including the heir himself. Even when primogeniture worked as it was supposed to do, keeping estates from being broken up and land from being dispersed into smaller parcels, the price of the system could be ruinous for virtually all members of the family.

The eldest son, despite his apparent advantage, was in a sense trapped, having no real option but to await the death of his father so that he could succeed to guardianship of the estate. The younger children fared much worse, dependent as they were on the goodwill of their father to provide for them. In the case of daughters, this meant money for a dowry with which to attract a husband; in the case of younger sons, an education or a living, or at least the means to marry well. But sometimes goodwill was hindered by a lack of resources. Owing to financial hardships or entails (legal restrictions deriving from earlier wills that controlled the use of property or income), some apparently wealthy fathers were unable to provide for their younger children. A younger son was sometimes regarded as insurance against the death of the eldest son — Lawrence Stone compares such a boy to “a kind of walking sperm bank” — and many of these young men attended the university and became clergymen. But the problem was pervasive enough in England in the 1590s for Falstaff to joke about drafting the “younger sons of younger brothers,” men who were at the bottom of the economic ladder and hadn’t a shilling to give in the way of a bribe to escape military service.

The system of inheritance was complicated to start with and grew more so in the Renaissance. Even now English property laws are notoriously complex, one source being the movement from the feudal system, by which *land*-lords (the word needs defamiliarizing) held Crown properties in tenancy, to the modern system, by which a larger number of individuals own outright or hold in tenancy smaller units of land. (In England today, much of the land is still legally held by aristocratic estates rather than by the people who own houses or flats on that property.) The sixteenth century saw the beginnings of this shift, but it also introduced a host of other problems. The transformation of England’s state religion from Catholicism to Protestantism, for example, led to the dissolution of religious houses such as monasteries and convents; one effect of this policy was a rise in the number of marriageable women, daughters who might have gone (cheaply) into convents but who now had to be provided for. Next, the significant increase in population between 1500 and 1600, with twice as many people occupying the same finite amount of land, created major economic and social dislocation. And the expansion of commerce produced cash that merchants and others wished to secure by investing in land. Shakespeare himself turned his London theatrical earnings into real estate investments in his hometown.

The social tensions inherent in the system of primogeniture find expression not only in diaries and court records but also in the theater of the period, where familial anxiety becomes the basis for dramatic conflict. In Thomas Middleton’s *Your Five Gallants*, a character encounters a group of fashionable

young men and greets them with, “Why so merry, gentlemen, are your fathers dead?” Such rivalry existed not only between fathers and children but also between widowed mothers and sons and among some siblings. One historian has suggested that the familial relationship least likely to suffer damage from the problems of inheritance was that between brother and sister, because the female’s secondary legal status meant that property was not an issue. It was certainly an issue between brothers. At the beginning of *As You Like It*, Orlando bitterly complains of being misused by his elder brother, Oliver, and cheated of his small inheritance:

OLIVER: Know you where you are, sir?

ORLANDO: O, sir, very well; here in your orchard.

OLIVER: Know you before whom, sir?

ORLANDO: Ay, better than him I am before knows me. I know you are my eldest brother, and in the gentle condition of blood you should so know me. The courtesy of nations allows you my better; in that you are the first born, but the same tradition takes not away my blood, were there twenty brothers betwixt us. I have as much of my father in me as you. . . . (1.1.40–50)

This is different from Edmund’s mockery of primogeniture. Orlando objects not to the system of inheritance (“the courtesy of nations”) but to his brother’s abuse of it in failing to honor their dead father’s provision for Orlando. The drama of the period contains a sufficient number of such scenes and references to intimate that inheritance was becoming a widespread social concern. Indeed, on a national scale, the question of succession was of paramount importance at the turn of the seventeenth century, since Queen Elizabeth had no firstborn to inherit her throne. In the Shakespeare family, William, as the eldest son, was the beneficiary of primogeniture, inheriting in 1601 the Henley Street property, where his aunt Joan continued to live. We may remark in passing that he had a younger (legitimate) brother, also an actor, named Edmund.

## Marriage and Money

Early modern matrimonial customs may seem cold-blooded, but it is important that we study them from a sixteenth-century point of view. Social historians such as Lawrence Stone and Ann Jennalie Cook have demonstrated that the ideas about romantic love and personal choice that govern our concepts of marriage are effects of social and attitudinal changes that took place in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Stone urges that we “rid ourselves of three modern Western culture-bound preconceptions”: (1) that marriage for love or personal attraction is morally superior to marriage for money or power, and that the categories are easily separable; (2) that authentic union must be underwritten by emotional attachment, or else the resulting marriage is the equivalent of commerce or prostitution; and (3) that personal autonomy or

individual desire in the selection of a marriage partner should outweigh the claims of the family or the larger social group. As he argues, "Marriage among the property-owning classes in sixteenth-century England was, therefore, a collective decision of family and kin, not an individual one" (*Family* 85-87).

In the words of a sixteenth-century proverb, "More belongs to marriage than four bare legs in a bed." Marriage was part of a system of inheritance and economics so ingrained and pervasive that the emotional affections or physical desires of a man and woman diminished in importance. This was especially true among the upper classes, where the amount of property being inherited could be substantial, and where marriage was regarded as a convenient instrument for joining or ensuring peace between two powerful families, for consolidating land holdings, or for achieving other familial, financial, or even political ends. Once a marriage was agreed on, certain fiscal transactions took place. The bride's family promised to give to the married couple a *dowry* made up of property, valuables (silver and jewelry, for example), and cash. This was also called the bride's *portion*, and it was paid at the time of the wedding or soon after, occasionally in installments. If a young man could find a young woman whose family could afford a substantial dowry, then he could look forward to living comfortably. Moreover, his parents might be able to save some of their holdings to settle on their other children, perhaps their own daughters. The groom's family agreed to provide the couple with money to live on, to specify exactly what the groom would inherit at his father's death, and to guarantee a *dower* (the parallel term to dowry), the sum that the bride would inherit should the groom die before her. Another guaranteed sum called the *jointure* protected the bride in case her husband's property was seized (e.g., for treason). In fact, it is useful to think of all of these settlements as a form of security, both for the couple being married and for the families sending them out into the world. The monetary arrangements I have described were designed to guarantee that the couple would live comfortably, and that if one partner should die the other would not be penniless or a drain on his or her family.

The complexities and permutations of this system were considerable, of course, but a few generalizations can be made about practices of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. It was better to have sons than daughters. Because primogeniture ensured that an estate was passed on intact from father to eldest son, that young man's prospects were very bright. His parents sought the daughter of a prominent or wealthy family whose dowry would be worthy of the inheritance he would receive. If his parents were dead, he presented himself to the family of an appropriate partner, as Petruchio does in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Indeed, consciousness of these economic and social customs makes such Shakespearean suitors as Petruchio and Claudio in *Much Ado about Nothing* look less like fortune hunters and more like prudent conservators of their familial legacy.

If the estate was extremely large, the father normally made financial arrangements for the daughters and younger sons; if it was extremely small, these younger children might be so disadvantaged that they would have to

remain unmarried. For younger sons in particular, this was considered a reasonable option, for they could find ways of supporting themselves — by teaching, taking religious orders, or even going to sea. Daughters, though, could serve as a serious drain on a family's estate. The father would need to provide a dowry for each in order to get them married and out of his house, and women lacked the alternatives to marriage that young men had. Although daughters could be costly to provide for, an heiress could improve a family's fortune by attracting the son of a prominent landed family. This system of financial reciprocity meant that the upper classes tended to marry at a younger age than the middle and lower classes because the size of the estates involved was a primary consideration. Marriages might be arranged even in the infancy of the couple concerned and confirmed when the prospective bride and groom reached puberty. Our nearest contact with this system is the complex set of negotiations that still attend the wedding of a member of the royal family in Britain or Japan. Practically speaking, ending a marriage through divorce was not an option in the early modern period, although on those rare occasions when it did occur (for reasons of sexual impotence, for instance), great care was taken about the financial consequences.

These arrangements applied to the wealthiest and most prominent members of society, but the middle and even the lower classes, insofar as they could, emulated these contractual practices in order to protect their offspring and guarantee financial stability. Parents had authority over their children in matters of marriage, certainly until the young person reached adulthood and, in some cases, as long as the parents lived. The dowry system required that a young man or woman receive parental approval, and sometimes even then the marriage could not go forward until certain obstacles were removed: property might need to be sold or cash might need to be raised, a process that could take some time; a suitable house might have to be found for the couple; a groom might have to wait until the end of his apprenticeship. Conversely, a match proposed by parents might have to wait until the couple themselves could be made to agree to it. A Shakespearean version of this scenario is Capulet's trouble with his recalcitrant teenage daughter in the fourth act of *Romeo and Juliet*.

The primacy of money in the matrimonial process raises the question of attraction or "love." Although the emotions of the young couple were not the main consideration in courtship, they were not utterly irrelevant, and the evidence suggests that then, as now, parents wanted to accommodate a child's desires while doing what they thought best for the child's future happiness. The passage from George Whetstone's *Heptameron of Civil Discourses* (p. 292) indicates an awareness of the value of free choice. At the risk of overgeneralizing, we can say that the more money was at stake, the less personal affection counted in the business of courtship. Shakespeare's comedies often turn on the question of who will decide on a suitable marriage partner. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, when Egeus insists on his power to select his daughter's mate — "she is mine, and all my right of her / I do estate unto Demetrius" (1.1.97-98) — his diction, particularly the possessive pronouns and the verb *estate*, indicates

the importance of property and his conception of his daughter as a possession. In *Much Ado about Nothing*, the young woman named Hero is an heiress who is a most eligible marriage partner, and when it appears that Don Pedro ("the Prince") will ask for her hand, her father appears ready to give her a choice: "I will acquit my daughter withal, that she may be the better prepar'd for an answer" (1.2.21-22). It may be, however, that he is merely engaging in a formality, that he will instruct her to be prepared to accept. Two scenes later her cousin Beatrice exposes the potential conflict of will:

ANTONIO [to Hero]: Well, niece, I trust you will be rul'd by your father.  
 BEATRICE: Yes, faith, it is my cousin's duty to make cur'sy and say, "Father, as it please you." But yet for all that, cousin, let him be a handsome fellow, or else make another cur'sy and say, "Father, as it please me." (2.1.50-56)

In fact, Don Pedro acts as a go-between and asks for Hero's hand on behalf of Claudio, whose social rank (Count) satisfies her father and whose appearance satisfies her. Like most writers of comedy, Shakespeare usually sympathizes with the daughter. But in reality, as opposed to the reality portrayed on stage, the clash between a parent's wishes and those of a son or daughter was usually decided in favor of the parent.

Where huge fortunes were not in the balance — that is, among the vast majority of young people in England — personal autonomy carried greater weight. Other considerations increased in importance, matters such as age, companionship, emotional sympathy, and sexual attraction. Also, there was apparently more time for choice. While among the upper classes the need to make financial arrangements as early as possible meant that they tended to marry their children in their teens, many English people waited until their midtwenties to marry. There are several reasons for this delay. In the early modern period, owing mainly to nutrition, children reached puberty somewhat later than they do now, perhaps a year or maybe even two or three years later, and this fact may have postponed slightly the physical urge to mate. But, as usual, the main causes were financial. A young man without family resources had to work for some time to afford the cost of marriage, which consisted at least of a dwelling for him and his bride and the establishment of a steady income to support her and the children who would follow. The effect of these circumstances was that most people put off getting married: in England in the sixteenth century, the average age for marriage was twenty-seven for men and twenty-four for women (see Laslett). In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare deliberately takes years off the age of the heroine in the sources (in one source she is seventeen, in another fifteen) for a variety of theatrical reasons, chiefly to magnify the drama of Juliet's progress from innocence to lovestruck girlhood to marriage to courageous suicide. But Romeo and Juliet should not be taken as typical candidates for marriage in sixteenth-century England. Although Shakespeare himself was eighteen on his wedding day, his wife was about twenty-six, and their surviving children, Susanna and Judith, did not marry until they were twenty-four and thirty-one.

## Family Life

Most people got married, and most people had children, but family life in the Renaissance was different from our experience. Juliet's nurse, in her conversation with Juliet and Lady Capulet, offers a glimpse of one of the principal differences:

But as I said,  
 On Lammas-eve at night shall she be fourteen,  
 That shall she, marry, I remember it well.  
 'Tis since the earthquake now alevn years,  
 And she was wean'd — I never shall forget it —  
 Of all the days of the year, upon that day,  
 For I had then laid wormwood to my dug,  
 Sitting in the sun under the dove-house wall.  
 My lord and you were then at Mantua —  
 Nay, I do bear a brain — but as I said,  
 When it did taste the wormwood on the nipple  
 Of my dug and felt it bitter, pretty fool,  
 To see it teachey and fall out wi' th' dug! (1.3.20-32)

This character is called Nurse because she nursed Juliet as an infant, and here she describes how she weaned the toddler from her breast milk by applying a bitter substance to her nipple. Although *Romeo and Juliet* is set in Italy in an unspecified century, this scene at least reflects conventional practice in sixteenth-century England: most well-to-do mothers did not nurse their babies, but instead turned them over to a wet nurse who suckled them after having weaned her own children. Although resistance to the practice began to manifest itself in the medical discourse of the late sixteenth century, wet nursing was still the rule for those who could afford it. Even the countess of Lincoln, whose treatise on the necessity of a mother's suckling her own children is excerpted on page 293, confesses at the end of her argument that as a young mother she herself was misled into employing a wet nurse, and she cautions other women against the practice.

Juliet's Nurse apparently lives in the Capulet household, but most English parents who could afford to do so gave up the child into the keeping and the household of the nurse, visiting it from time to time and then receiving it again into their home when the child was weaned. The choice of a proper nurse was important, as Gail Kern Paster, the most recent authority on the topic, points out.

In hiring her services, parents leased exclusive rights to her lactating breasts and their milk. During the period of hire, the wet nurse was expected not to suckle another child and to maintain an adequate supply of milk. She was expected not to menstruate, not to become pregnant, and if she did, to notify her nurse-child's parents. (199)

Paster goes on to add that "nurses' moral and ethical qualities mattered since these were believed to be transmitted through the milk" (200). Naturally these