

Shakespeare and Marriage: An Open Question

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Abstract

Marriage is a focus of conflict today, from lamentations about divorce rates to legal contests over same-sex marriage. It was equally contested in Shakespeare's England, even if the issues at stake were somewhat different. Recent scholarship on the history of marriage has unsettled many of the assumptions that once governed discussions of early modern marriage and its representation on the stage. It is no longer safe to assume we know what early modern marriage meant, how it felt, or what it achieved or required. This essay focuses particularly on new research on rates of marriage in early modern England, on married women's agency, will, and work, and on same-sex attachments. What are the implications of these new approaches for our readings of Shakespeare's plays? Is marriage a happy ending? Is it an ending at all?

'Shakespeare and Marriage' seems at first a dispiritingly familiar conjunction of topics. For centuries now, biographers have speculated about Shakespeare's own marriage, literary critics have turned to the history of marriage in an effort to make sense of the puzzling details and mixed messages about marriage one finds in the plays, and historians have looked to the plays for evidence regarding early modern marriage, or the timelessness of love, or the limitations of literature as historical evidence. Peter Laslett epitomizes that last approach in his assertion that it 'is not true' that 'English women in Shakespeare's day' married in their early teens as several of Shakespeare's heroines (most notably Juliet and Miranda) do (81). Even in Laslett's stern phrasing, the relationship between marriage in Shakespeare's day and in Shakespeare's plays is not self-evident.

For example, Katherine's last speech detailing the gendered division of spousal temperament and labor in *The Taming of the Shrew* has been quoted as proof of the centrality of reciprocity and shared responsibility in long-standing Anglo-American ideals of marriage (Cott 12–3; Hartog 155–6; Underdown 117); it has also been read as articulating values that were, in the 16th century, either obviously anachronistic or boldly new (Boose 184; Korda 52–75). It can be viewed as moving testimony to an enduring vision of married love or as stomach-churning proof of the gender inequities of a former era. The play as a whole can be read as evidence of the persistence of English patriarchy as an aspiration and fantasy and of its internal contradictions and robust contestation; of the acceptance or censure of domestic violence; of changing or persistent spousal roles; of the enormous effort the model of male headship in marriage required and its dependence on wives to 'say as I say'; of the rewards women might secure through performative submission or the costs they might pay for peace, and love and quiet life; of violent subordination or of erotic and verbal mutuality. The play bears out all of the above contentions, suggesting that they are all viable ways of thinking about marriage in the early modern period, all available in the play itself. Much of the play's action focuses on that uncertain phase between the wedding and the consummation when the terms of the marriage are being negotiated and the spouses are not quite joined yet. The fact that one might make a bet

regarding the nature of the relationship between spouses, and everyone involved might view the outcome as unpredictable, gives us a sense that the only common knowledge about marriage was that it did not guarantee anything. As obsolete as the notion of shrew-taming might seem, the play opens up issues that remain under debate about what marriage means, what it requires of participants, what it makes possible or impossible, what costs it exacts and who has to pay them.

The relationship of Shakespeare to marriage is not only a matter of historically situating Shakespeare's works, or marriage, or both. The frequent recourse to Shakespeare for readings at weddings is a reminder that, however we understand the union of 'Shakespeare and Marriage', neither term is lodged safely in the past. Shakespeare remains a resource for imagining and expressing our expectations of marriage today. In looking again at the topic of Shakespeare and marriage, it is necessary to, at once, surrender what we thought we knew, embrace new knowledge, and ask new questions. We must also accept how much we'll never know about the experience of early modern marriage. Much is inaccessible to us not only because of the passage of time but also because other people's intimate lives are always shrouded in mystery.

Recent scholarship on the history of marriage has unsettled many of the assumptions that once governed discussions of early modern marriage and its representation on the stage. Many scholars have located dramatic changes in the motives for and meanings of marriage in the 16th and 17th centuries. It has been variously argued that marriage moved from a sacrament to a contract, from a practical arrangement to regulate sexuality and to provide for children to a loving bond between companions, from a second-class alternative to clerical celibacy – in line with the Pauline concession that 'it is better to marry than to burn' – to an honorable, indeed, preferable way of life. Lawrence Stone made the boldest and most contested arguments about dramatic changes in early modern marriage, arguing, for instance, that a new emphasis on marital companionship and romantic love began in the upper classes and trickled down to the lower orders. Many early challenges to Stone's hypotheses emphasized continuity rather than change (Houlbrooke; Macfarlane).¹ Increasingly, discussion of early modern marriage focuses on the coexistence of continuity and change, what Keith Wrightson describes as 'enduring structures' and 'uneven' processes of change (12–3). New values jockeyed against old ones. Different people had different motives for marrying or not marrying; one marriage differed from another; any given person might have mixed feelings and mixed motives. Men and women married for a wide range of reasons. They might marry for financial gain or security – from running a shop or farm together to uniting vast estates – or to secure alliances – from forging bonds with friends and allies at a local level to dynastic marriages. They might marry largely to please other people or driven by their own need or want. They might marry to have intercourse and legitimate offspring, to achieve adult status, or to avoid loneliness and secure companionship. Most would probably have more than one motive. Motives for a first marriage might differ from those for a second. Many probably chose a spouse based on attraction and affection, as well as practical considerations such as shared faith. Romantic love was neither new, nor irrelevant, nor an inevitable part of making and sustaining marriages. It was sometimes important to some people.

It used to be assumed that marriage was inevitable, not only for the heroines of Shakespeare's comedies, but for women in early modern England. One legal theorist writing in the 17th century claimed that women are all either married, about to be married, or widowed. In Shakespeare's plays, that's largely but not invariably the case. But, as the presence of an unmarried queen on the throne constantly reminded people, that wasn't always true off the stage. Not everyone got married. Some women never married, either

because they chose not to, or because their options were foreclosed by poverty, disability, or a host of other reasons (Bennett and Froide; Erickson; Froide). Of those who did marry, many did not do so until long after puberty (Laslett). Mary Hartman stresses the importance of a late marriage pattern in England from 1500 to 1750, through which women married men closer to their own ages. Many women who married then survived their husbands as widows (Brodsky; Panek). That is, while most women married, even those who did might expect to spend a good part of their adult life unmarried.

The same was true for men. Although marriage was widely considered synonymous with adult manhood, not all men married. As many as one-fifth of younger sons in propertied families could not afford to marry (*Stone, Family, Sex, and Marriage* 44). The sizable percentage of men who, at a given time, served as apprentices, learning a trade, or who worked as servants were also not free to marry. According to Alexandra Shepard,

To have the freedom of the town, or to be married, implied the independent status which was the social and economic basis of patriarchal manhood. This was, however, a position held by a decreasing minority of males at any one time. It had to be striven for by the majority of men, it did not arrive automatically, and for many men it did not ever fully transpire. (206)

Furthermore, as Shepard emphasizes, this status as independent was paradoxically dependent on a wife who might imperil it in a range of ways, as Shakespeare's plays explore. If financial gain was one motive for marrying – Petruchio wasn't the only one with the goal of wiving wealthily – poverty and financial dependence could also be impediments to marriage.

Marriage was not, then, a given. Nor was it entirely clear what constituted a legally binding marriage. By the 17th century, it was widely accepted that marriages should be advertised in advance by the calling of banns three times, solemnized in open church by a minister, and recorded in the parish register. Still, many marriages were transacted outside of these rules and they remained binding nonetheless. Long before marriage licenses and blood tests, marriage was transacted between husband and wife; neither a priest nor a lawyer was strictly necessary. Indeed, the Reformation insistence that marriage was not a sacrament placed more emphasis than ever on the spouses as those who made the marriage, through vows and sexual consummation, even as the Church of England attempted to exert more control over the sanctification and regulation of marriage. Couples who had married themselves might be brought before a church court for their 'irregularity' and punished for their conduct by excommunication, penance, or a fee. But unless one spouse or the other was already married to someone else, the marriage could not be dissolved, especially if the couple had children. In the absence of children, there might be some room for interpretation and negotiation. In church court suits for matrimonial enforcement (i.e., suits that seek to compel a party or parties to recognize that they are legally bound in marriage), testimony often focuses on the exchange of vows or gifts, or on sexual consummation, as proof that a legally binding marriage had been transacted or promised irrevocably. But it was a matter of debate and negotiation. An 'irregular' marriage might be denied or escaped, especially if both spouses wished to move on to another choice and no one else had a reason to make an issue of it.² Since, as we will see, it was harder to get out of a marriage then than it is now, some people might have wished to cultivate or exploit ambiguities regarding whether they were married.

In *As You Like It*, Jaques warns Touchstone against being married by Sir Oliver Martext. He advises him that he should 'get you to a church, and have a good priest that can tell you what marriage is' perform the ceremony. It's interesting to consider who constitutes a good priest in this play given that we also see Celia reluctantly preside over

the wedding Ganymede stages between himself and Orlando, and later the god Hymen playing priest. Jaques warns Touchstone that Martext will join him to Audrey the way poor craftsmen join wainscotting: 'then one of you will prove a shrunk panel and, like green timber, warp, warp' (3.3.70–3). For Touchstone, this promises to be an advantage.

I were better to be married of him than of another, for he is not like to marry me well, and not being well married, it will be a good excuse for me hereafter to leave my wife. (3.3.74–7)

This wonderful exchange opens up the possibility that one might knowingly exploit the uncertainties regarding what constituted a binding marriage, cultivating a weak 'join' and the prospect of warping away from one's spouse. Even this clown is depicted as knowing something about the wiggle room made possible by warring jurisdictions and procedures in a state of flux. The idea that Sir Oliver Martext might make Touchstone's marriage less binding gives us a sense of a sliding scale of marital legitimacy. But at the end of the play, Hymen pronounces that Touchstone and Audrey are 'sure together/As the winter to foul weather' (5.4.124–5). They're bound fast and cannot be rent asunder, even if that bond is a gloomy one. They may 'wrangle' and they may be 'victualled' for only 'two months' but they are bound for life, squabbling and hungry (5.4.180–1).

If there were various ways, formal and informal, to make marriages there were far fewer ways to unmake them. In England until the 19th century, divorce was harder to obtain than in any other Protestant country. As a consequence, the ways out of marriage remained fairly consistent before and after the Reformation, for Catholics and for Protestants. Marriages could be annulled but only on limited grounds (such as bigamy or non-consummation). The so-called Essex divorce, to which several plays refer, was technically an annulment since it proceeded on the grounds that the marriage had never been consummated and so had never really existed (Lindley). Church courts could grant separations, but these did not enable the estranged spouses to remarry. Legal separations created a range of financial complications. Some husbands were remiss in paying the mandated maintenance to their wives while others exploited their privileges as husbands to gain control of their estranged wives' earnings. In turn, some wives ran up debts for which their estranged husbands could be held liable. Despite the problems with legal separations, surviving church court records suggest that women sued more often for separation than men did. The grounds were distinctly gendered: men accused their wives of adultery, while women accused their husbands of cruelty (Amussen 127–9; Gowing 180–231). In the 1690s, Parliament granted what were arguably the first true divorces, that is, allowing for remarriage, but this option was available only to peers on grounds of their wives' adultery (Stone, *Road*). Desertion was often an unofficial solution to irreconcilable differences, but it was hard on women, especially those with children, since it left them without financial support. As a consequence, men tended to desert their wives, more than wives did their husbands. The vow in The Book of Common Prayer marriage ceremony – 'till death us depart' – predicted the plot of most marriages, which ended only when one spouse or the other died.

We can see some of these marital exit strategies in the plays. *Henry VIII* or *All Is True* dramatizes the process of King Henry's divorce from his first wife, Katherine, a divorce that shifted paradigms even if it did not make divorce more readily available – except for Henry himself, who proceeded to prove himself adept at ending marriages. For the most part the plays show marriages ending as they most often did, with informal separations or with death. Sometimes those deaths require effort, as when Othello kills Desdemona or Claudius kills Hamlet Senior. Sometimes they just happen, as is the case with all of those dead wives and mothers who lurk in the backstories. The plots offer some interesting

spins on these options, however. In *The Winter's Tale*, for example, Hermione's apparent death achieves a 16-year separation for the estranged couple. In both *The Comedy of Errors* and *Pericles*, a wife lost at sea is found to be still alive. In those plots, too, the presumption of the wife's death has secured a marital separation that functions as a kind of 'time out' during which the separated spouses don't remarry – although they might have – and so can resume their marriage when they are reunited. These unchosen suspensions of marriage are not unlike those imposed by war, travel, and business on many couples (Christensen). Shakespeare himself, after all, lived apart from his wife most of the time, although not, presumably, because he was under the misapprehension that she had been lost at sea or turned to stone. In Shakespeare's plots, we see historically specific options put to use in fantastical ways; the plots draw our attention to the emotional implications of the available ways to make and unmake marriages. They operate within the real options but, for all the scholarly attention to the technicalities of vows in the present or future tense, what the plays tend to explore is the emotional logic of joining or putting asunder, of choosing or being subject to the vagaries of fate, whether spousal jealousy or shipwrecks.

The emotional logic of joining husband and wife in early modern England proves to be more complicated than we once thought. That 'Jack shall have Jill and nought shall go ill' may have been a wish rather than a confident assertion. As several scholars have recently reminded us, early modern English culture idealized friendships between members of the same sex and the same status as the most equal, consensual, and precious relationships (Bray, Masten, Traub 276–325). Laurie Shannon argues that, in contrast, early modern discourses depict marriage as the joining of those who are unlike and unequal. All marriages, by this logic, are 'mixed'.

Though heterosexual coupling—it goes without saying—is a *sine qua non* of social reproduction and so draws support from a range of other cultural imperatives, its merger of disparate, incommensurate kinds, especially in marital or celebratory forms, poses something of an intellectual problem. However normative it may be as hierarchy, it contradicts the likeness topos at the center of positive ideas about union.

Perhaps, Shannon suggests, marriage is so constantly discussed and enjoined in the early modern period because a special case needs to be made in favor of directing one's affect toward marriage, toward the opposite sex, and, in men's case, toward an inferior. Marriage's apologists had to argue, then, not just against a tradition of valuing virginity and celibacy over marriage but a 'same-sex economy' that 'explicitly eschews or downgrades cross-sex association' (Shannon 56, 64–65, 67). Shannon's eye-opening argument presents marriage as both a *sine qua non* of social reproduction, as we have long assumed it to be, *and* as a conceptual problem and therefore a tough sell.

Shannon helps us see that all cross-sex unions can be imagined as what Touchstone calls warped joins. Enormous effort went into imagining how two persons so different could become one (Dolan). Biblical language about forsaking all others and becoming one flesh articulated the investment in the marital bond as unique and physical. According to Thomas Gataker, to take one example,

Husband and Wife are neerer than Friends, and Brethren; or than Parents and Children. Children, though they spring from their Parents, yet they abide not alwaies with them. They are as rivers rising from one head, but taking severall waies, making severall streames, and running apart in severall channels. But man and wife must bide by it. (B3)

While children are inevitably branches cut off of

their native stocke, and either planted or engrafted else-where [,] Man and Wife are as the stocke and sience [that is, scion], the one ingrafted into the other, and so fastned together, that they cannot againe be sundered. (Gataker B3)

But Gataker's imagery, like the Biblical image of two becoming one flesh on which it elaborates, belies the ways in which the couple was also embedded in a network of other relationships. Husband and wife might stand at the center and the top of the household, but they did not stand alone. Their other domestic relations motivated, supported, undermined, and competed with their marriage. Stephanie Coontz's wonderful deflation of the idealized American family of the 1950s as 'the way we never were' can be extended to Stone's description of an early modern 'reduced, nuclear, patriarchal family'. Such a family was not the early modern norm. Indeed, the word 'family' included servants and friends (Tadmor). Most histories of marriage acknowledge this fact by defining their object of study as marriage *and the family*. Marriage was not, then, a merger only between individuals, but a way of connecting the spouses' families, of establishing a household that would include servants and relatives, and of uniting friends. The role of marriage in uniting friends is particularly visible in the drama, which sometimes subordinates or even sacrifices bonds between spouses to those between friends, especially male ones (Bach; DiGangi; Wall).

Although many sermons and conduct books defended marriage as a means of domesticating sexual impulses, a wide range of evidence – and a fresh set of questions – suggest that marriage did not define and control sexual expression. It was widely assumed that spouses owed one another a 'conjugal debt' because marriage obligated one to provide sexual solace to one's spouse. But not all married spouses had sex. To take just a few controversial and well-documented instances, Katherine of Aragon claimed she had not consummated her marriage to her husband, Arthur, and was therefore free to marry his younger brother, Henry VIII; and Frances Howard claimed she had never consummated her marriage to her husband, the Earl of Essex. In more mundane cases, in which the claim to nonconsummation was not connected to annulling a marriage, illness and impotence and disinclination might prevent a couple from having sex. On the flip side of the obligation to have sex in marriage was unease about enjoying sex too much or doting on one's spouse in an undignified manner. Sermons and conduct books warn spouses against using endearments, but this might not tell us anything about whether spouses themselves felt one could overdo sexual desire within marriage. Shakespeare's tragedies offer another resource for thinking about attitudes toward conjugal sexuality. What we find therein is profound ambivalence. For example, many critics have identified Othello's distrust of the very passion that draws him to Desdemona. Janet Adelman discusses how Othello ultimately recoils from his longing for complete fusion with his wife, and exacts vengeance on her for the force of that longing and the threat it posed to his identity (63–75); Stephen Greenblatt finds 'Othello's buried perception of his own sexual relations with Desdemona as adulterous' (Greenblatt 233); Michael Neill identifies a 'sense of scandal' in the history of the play's reception, an 'anxious fascination' with the spectacle of the marriage bed, a bed rendered particularly 'hideous' by the fact that it contains black and white bodies (Neill 238). Shannon's work suggests that this 'unproper bed' exaggerates the scandal inherent in every marriage bed as the site of the unseemly congress between those who are unlike. In the drama as in some other kinds of evidence, we find both queasiness about intercourse as an 'expense of spirit' and a 'little death' and rapturous celebrations of what Milton called 'wedded love'.

Just as marriage did not invariably include or legitimate sex between spouses, a wealth of sexual practices existed outside or alongside marriage. We can find evidence for these

practices in the rich archives of church courts, which regulated sexual conduct, focusing on fornication, bastard-bearing, and adultery. These records suggest that many people had sex before marriage; this was not usually punished if it led to marriage, as the high rate of what is called 'bridal pregnancy' suggests it often did (Ingram 219–37). When Isabella in *Measure for Measure* responds to the predicament of her brother Claudio and his pregnant fiancée, Juliet, 'O, let him marry her', she proposes a familiar solution to the problem of pregnancy outside of marriage (1.4.48). Through marriage, potential bastards became legitimate heirs.

In church court records we find charges of fornication or adultery – that is, sex between consenting adults who were not married to one another. Church courts could impose shaming punishments and fines, but that was the limit of their disciplinary power (Ingram; Gowing); Bridewell was also increasingly regulating sexual offenses, with somewhat sharper teeth, imposing whippings and incarcerations (Griffiths 253–90). While church court records are invaluable, they document only sexual acts that were defined as sinful, and that were caught and prosecuted. Similarly, statute law and criminal courts focused on those sexual offenses that were felonies – rape and sodomy.

Some literary critics have argued for the particular usefulness of literature in considering a range of sexual practices that may have flourished under the radar of legal scrutiny (DiGangi; Freccero; Traub). Penetration usually defined the sexual conduct that attracted legal scrutiny. Other forms of sexual expression often appear to have gone unremarked because they were not defined and censured as crimes or sins, because they were 'impossible' to imagine, at least for some, or because they were with social subordinates and therefore, sometimes, either acceptable or invisible. We can only speculate about practices that were possible precisely because they were off the record, but opening up such speculations, and finding traces of these possibilities in representations outside the legal pale, has made it possible for us to consider sexual practices that had nothing to do with marriage or might even have been enabled under the cover of marriage. For example, Laura Gowing has shown that married women's pregnancies and births were not scrutinized in the ways that singlewomen's pregnancies were. Julie Crawford and Valerie Traub have argued that some forms of attachment and erotic expression between women might have coexisted with marriage (Crawford; Traub). In sum, the more we learn about marriage in the early modern period, the messier it all seems – and the more interesting.

The unsettling of assumptions and pieties about early modern marriage has led to new approaches to the marriages depicted in Shakespeare's plays. The plays offer us no one model of the relationship between spouses, no norm. In the plays we sometimes see the wife on top, and sometimes the husband. Often a plot about a married couple focuses on their skirmishes for dominance, as in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. We sometimes see unclear distinctions between the role of wife and husband (in a couple such as Cesario and Orsino). We sometimes see spouses side by side; when we do, equals can sometimes appear to be mighty opposites facing off toe to toe, since parity so often becomes rivalry in the plays (as in *Antony and Cleopatra*, in which Antony meets his match in both Cleopatra and Octavius).

Surrendering assumptions to look anew has been particularly revealing with regard to what marriage meant for early modern women. Focusing on depictions of women's work in the drama, Michelle Dowd, Natasha Korda, and Wendy Wall have demonstrated the influence early modern married women wielded by fulfilling rather than resisting prescribed roles as well as the dependency of the social order on women's work in order to sustain and reproduce itself. Kathryn Schwarz expands our understanding of women's work and of dependency in subtle ways, revealing social hierarchy as a dynamic negotiation. Describing

Helena in *All's Well* as 'choosing and chasing her desired object until he succumbs to something more like exhaustion than bliss' (200), Schwarz takes her as an example of 'an outrageously intentional, sexual, articulate, and efficient femininity that runs amok without doing anything wrong' (207). In this play and elsewhere in the Shakespeare canon, Schwarz argues, 'Constancy intervenes into masculine homosocial privilege in a way at once vital and unsettling, its guarantees securing a hierarchy that they expose as a structure of need' (Schwarz 201). Nowhere is this more evident than in the final scene of *The Taming of the Shrew*, in which we see how much Petruchio needs Katherine to perform her compliance in front of an audience and how anxiously and uncertainly Lucentio and Hortensio watch to see how their wives will respond to their commands.

Merry Wives of Windsor is another Shakespeare play that has benefitted from fresh approaches to what marriage meant for wives and what wives did for marriage and the family. The wives, Mistress Page and Mistress Ford, have long been married when the play begins. While this play includes a typical marriage plot, focusing on outwitting young Anne Page's parents so that she can marry Master Fenton, the man of her choice, it subordinates it to a taming plot by which the merry wives cure Master Ford of jealousy and get revenge on Falstaff for casting doubt on their sexual honor. For the wives, the main business is staying married and managing their households and their husbands as they like it. Mistress Quickly says to Falstaff of Mistress Page:

Never a wife in Windsor leads a better life than she does. Do what she will; say what she will; take all, pay all; go to bed when she list; rise when she list; all is as she will. (2.2.106–9)

For these particular wives, tricking and taming men is more fun than adultery. At the same time, the plot has the structure of adultery in that, in the end, Mistress Ford lies with Master Brooke, her husband's alter ego.

As critics have pointed out, the play not only attends to the specifics of domestic work but values them. As Wendy Wall argues, 'the play offers a female fantasy in which household labor insures pleasure, profit, and social order' (Wall 121). Natasha Korda has shown that a wife's job was to keep surveillance on the household and its goods, so that, when Mr Ford competes with his wife in this, he paradoxically exposes the household rather than protecting it (76–110). Ford's anxiety about his inability to control his wife is extreme.

See the hell of having a false woman! My bed shall be abused, my coffers ransacked, my reputation gnawn at, and I shall not only receive this villainous wrong, but stand under the adoption of abominable terms, and by him that does me this wrong..... I will rather trust a Fleming with my butter, Parson Hugh the Welshman with my cheese, an Irishman with my aqua-vitae bottle, or a thief to walk my ambling gelding, than my wife with herself. (2.2.257–68)

Yet he must trust his wife with herself – and, indeed, with his bed, coffers, and reputation. As his outburst both laments and reveals, his position as household head depends on his wife's self-possession and provident care of his material goods. As Edmund Tilney advised in 1568,

the man that is not lyked, and loved of his mate, holdeth his lyfe in continuall perill, his goodes in great jeopardie, his good name in suspect, and his whole house in utter perdition. (Tilney 112)

Mrs. Page and Mrs. Ford take threats to their reputations seriously. Mrs. Page proclaims:

We'll leave a proof by that which we will do,
Wives may be merry, and yet honest too.
We do not act that often jest and laugh. (4.2.88–90)

Pamela Brown draws our attention to the word 'act' in this passage as having 'sexual and theatrical meanings': 'Without taking action their neighbors would call dishonest, the wives can leave no proof that they have acted honestly'. So the wives do and act, 'using the erotic duplicity of theater to perform their honesty' (Brown 47). Authorized by what Mrs. Ford calls 'the warrant of womanhood', they defend their reputations, their mirth, and their marriages (4.2.179–80).

When they have taught Mr Ford his lesson, Page advises him not to buckle under too completely: 'Tis well, 'tis well; no more./Be not as extreme in submission/As in offence' (4.4.9–11). Achieving that balance is always the difficult part and it's a constant concern in Shakespearean depictions of marriage. With their heads together, Mrs. Page and Mrs. Ford suggest the possibility that the readiest balance might be achieved between members of the same sex. At one point, Ford proclaims in exasperation 'I think if your husbands were dead you two would marry'. While Mistress Page moves quickly to close off the image of the merry wives as a couple – 'Be sure of that—two other husbands' – she doesn't refuse Ford's suggestion that he and Page are replaceable (3.2.11–3). We see Mistress Page and Mistress Ford confer and act with one another more than with their husbands; indeed, the Pages work to thwart one another's schemes for their daughter's marriage, whereas the merry wives are always on the same page.

We see many relationships between those who are depicted as similar, even as doubles, in the plays. But marriage sometimes appears to supplant such attachments. Cousins who are 'coupled and inseparable' (*As You Like It* 1.3.70) turn their affections toward their prospective husbands and choose to live apart; friends who were 'two lovely berries moulded on one stem' (*Midsummer Night's Dream* 3.2.212) become rivals; of best friends, one must shed the pants to become a wife (as happens in *As You Like It* and is promised in *Twelfth Night*). Still, as Julie Crawford has argued, the plays' endings do not always or successfully erase those queer possibilities, which might even be facilitated by marriage and the appearance of closure. Mistress Ford and Mistress Page offer one such example of a same-sex attachment that Mr Ford at least can recognize as a kind of marriage and that coexists with cross-sex marriage, supporting it and in turn being supported by it. While the joke played on Anne Page's suitors, Slender and Caius, suggests that it is a comeuppance for a man to find that his bride is 'a great lubberly boy', the fruitful partnership between Mistress Ford and Mistress Page suggests that it isn't that simple.

The merry wives allow us to think into the future of marriage, so often the terrain of tragedy, in order to imagine a comic act six so to speak. For me, this raises the question of whether marriage is a happy ending, and if so, for whom and by what standard. Marriage isn't always the ending of comedies, of course. Many Shakespearean weddings occur offstage, described rather than displayed, as in *Taming of the Shrew*, or promised after the play is over, as in *Twelfth Night*. Those that occur earlier in plays are often interrupted; they are 'broken nuptials' as Carol Neely pointed out, motivating plots to restore what has been put asunder. So the first step toward asking whether marriage is a happy ending is interrogating whether it actually serves as an ending at all. Byron famously pronounced that 'All tragedies are ended with a death; all comedies are ended with a marriage. The future states of both are left to faith'. While I share his skepticism about the outcome of both marriage and death, I want to point out that his sweeping statement about genre isn't entirely true with regard to Shakespearean comedy. One of the interesting things about *Taming of the Shrew*, for instance, is that the wedding takes place in act two but it is unclear when the marriage is consummated; that consummation might well occur only after the wager has been won and the play is over. While it seems silly to speculate about when or whether characters have sex, it is important that the negotiations that constitute

the play's plot occur in the gray area when the couple is not quite married and they are hashing out the nature of their relationship. John Fletcher exploits the possibilities of this phase between the wedding and consummation, when a woman is no longer in her father's house but does not yet consider herself a wife, in his sequel to *Shrew*, *The Woman's Prize or the Tamer Tamed*.

When marriage does function as an ending, as it does in *Much Ado*, does it feel like a happy one? This is a question I like to ask in post- or pre-performance talks at Shakespeare festivals because the answer is so clearly supposed to be 'yes', yet many audience members have lingering doubts about the conclusions of the plays without knowing how to put their reservations into words or whether they are allowed to have such reservations about Shakespeare. Furthermore, many productions do everything in their power to banish those doubts – straightening up the ending of *Twelfth Night*, for instance, by getting Cesario into a wedding dress rather than leaving him and Orsino as a couple, him and Sebastian as identical twins, as the text does.³ Whether marriage is a happy ending is an open question for me at the end of many plays. In *Measure for Measure*, Marianna is offered marriage as a compensation whereas Lucio and Angelo are married off as a form of discipline. We might choose to view the Duke's proposal to Isabella as either, which is why it is hard to determine whether she says yes or no.

In *Much Ado About Nothing*, I find it hard to forget and forgive the shock of Hero's and Claudio's disrupted wedding⁴; Claudio's desire not just to break off his engagement to her but to humiliate her; her father's claim that 'death is the fairest cover for her shame/That may be wished for' (4.1.114–5); or the fact that Claudio does not express grief for her death until he is compelled to do so, and then marks his repentance by submitting to marry a "copy" of Hero sight unseen, insisting that he'll do so even "were she an Ethiop" (5.4.38), one of many references in Shakespeare to a racialized standard of beauty. When, at the end of the play, Hero emphasizes that a part of her has died – 'One Hero died defiled' – she acknowledges that something is irreparably lost even as the lovers are reunited. It is an-other Hero if not an-other Claudio who marry now.

From Claudio's perspective, what exactly is Hero's alleged crime? Claudio and Don Pedro, from a distance, heard her 'talk with a ruffian at her chamber window' and in that talk she 'confessed' to 'vile encounters' 'a thousand times in secret' (4.1.89–93). Claudio ignores everything he knows about Hero in order to believe what he thinks he learns posted at a distance from her window. Beatrice and Benedick, too, trust what they overhear. In both cases, the spectacle taken as evidence has been manufactured; the spectators are deceived. Seeing and hearing this exchange at the window completely convinces Claudio and Don Pedro of Hero's unchastity. But is that a crime? In the 16th and 17th centuries, sexual misconduct was only a felony – a crime punishable by death – for queens. Henry VIII's queens Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard were both executed for sexual misconduct, Anne for adultery and incest, Catherine for fornication before marriage with someone other than her future husband. Even for the king, it required retroactive legal maneuvering to justify these charges as treason. For most people other than Henry's wives, sexual crime was not a felony – except on the stage and especially in plays set in foreign countries as if to say 'you could be killed for that *there*'. It was, at most, a matter for the church courts we've discussed above, which also handled slander litigation. It was not legally, morally, or socially clear exactly what one should or could do with a woman who had sex outside of marriage. What happens to Hero might be viewed as wishful thinking: a woman who is unchaste would simply drop dead. That fantasy is explored in other plays as well, particularly in Thomas Heywood's *The English Traveller*, in which the adulterous wife Mistress Wincott dies of shame (Wall 207–20).

If, in *Much Ado*, as in the disputes that unfolded before church courts, a woman's reputation depends mostly on her sexual honor, what does it mean to be a man? Leonato blusters his desire to kill Hero if she's guilty or if she is innocent to avenge her on her slanderers (4.1). When Beatrice says 'O that I were a man!' she quickly explains that for her this would mean the power to accuse publicly, to express rage openly, and to injure. 'O God that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the market place' (4.1.300–4). This is not an easy definition to live up to. It frustrates Beatrice, who cannot be a man, but it also burdens Leonato and his brother Antonio, whose age prevents them from wielding the physical force that they feel the situation requires; and it frightens Benedick who is not eager to fight or kill Claudio. Whereas being a woman is being willing to die to redeem your honor, as Hero does, being a man is being willing to kill. No wonder Beatrice and Benedick are both stuck between these unforgiving possibilities and stymied by the prospect of making a match.

The play presents marriage between gender opposites as desirable, almost inevitable – and terrifying. Benedick constantly jokes about his fear of being cuckolded – even at the end of the play. Such jokes are pervasive in Shakespeare's plays. But it's more than that: a husband's fear of being a cuckold also drives plots from *Merry Wives*, to *Othello*, to *The Winter's Tale*. It has often been observed that while 'cuckold' describes a man whose wife is unfaithful, there is no word for a woman whose husband is unfaithful except 'wife'; as the lovely song in *Much Ado* reminds us, 'weep no more ladies ... men were deceivers ever.' Cuckold is a new word for many students; it has to be glossed and discussed, and the particular double standard it signals is not one that is familiar to them, even if marital infidelity still bears gendered meanings. I find Hortense Spillers' pithy condensation of the conjectural nature of paternity – 'mama's baby, papa's maybe' – useful shorthand for what's at issue in all those jokes about paternity in the plays, jokes that DNA tests have made somewhat obsolete.

While cuckold is a word that alerts students to historical difference through its unfamiliarity, whore is a word that can obscure change over time since it is still a widely used and rigorously gendered insult (Stanton). In Shakespeare's plays, this word appears most often in *Othello* (10 times), where Othello and Iago both use it to describe Desdemona, Iago uses it to insult Emilia, and Emilia and Desdemona both object to the violence of being 'bewhored' (4.2.118). There were other words for unchaste women as well. Claudio, for example, calls Hero a 'wanton.' Both 'cuckold' and 'whore' focus on female sexual misconduct. Assessing the language of both church court depositions and plays, Rebecca Bach identifies a vocabulary for male sexual misconduct in early modern England, with 'knave' as one of its key terms (Bach 74). In *Merry Wives*, that term is used most often in the heated exchanges between sexual rivals Ford and Falstaff. In *Much Ado*, it is the word Dogberry uses to describe Conrad and Borachio's conspiracy to slander Hero: 'to conclude, they are lying knaves' (5.1.205). The knave may not be the equivalent of the whore, but being a 'lying knave' is a punishable offense in the play, as in Shakespeare's England.

Beatrice and Benedick both express fears about marriage, fears that emerge from high expectations. Beatrice wonders what it must be like to subordinate yourself to someone you find to be your inferior: 'Would it not grieve a woman to be overmastered with a piece of valiant dust?' (2.1.51–2). Benedick fears not only being cuckolded but being disappointed by imperfection: 'till all graces be in one woman, one woman shall not come in my grace' (2.3.25–6). While Beatrice shares Benedick's unease about marriage, her reluctance takes a somewhat different form – a fear that she might no longer be able to speak her mind or assert her will as a wife. Leonato warns her that her 'shrewd' tongue

will prevent her from finding a husband (2.1.16–17); Benedick remarks memorably that he ‘cannot endure my Lady Tongue’ (2.1.238–9). While she and Benedick are both taxed by their friends with pride, it is she who is chided for talking too much. Their friends have had to ‘fashion’ them together by persuading each of them that s/he is not especially lovable and yet, remarkably, beloved. While Beatrice vows to repay Benedick’s reported love for her by ‘taming [her] wild heart’ to his loving hand (3.1.112–3), it might be argued that both lovers are tamed not by one another but by the possibility of love imposed on or revealed to them by their mischievous friends. If marriage is in part a form of discipline in *Much Ado*, in the courtship between Beatrice and Benedick we see more mutuality than comic plots often allow. *Much Ado* resists, for Beatrice and Benedick, the familiar process of comic closure by which standoffs seem to end when one of the two who stand toe to toe stands down. In the end, Benedick so embraces the outcome that he advises the Prince that the remedy for sadness is to ‘get thee a wife’ (5.4.117). Yet he also sustains his insistence that to be a married man is to be a cuckold and he defers the two weddings until after the dancing and after the play’s end.

While new insights into marriage are emerging from these interrogations of what marriage meant in early modern England and in Shakespeare’s plays, they can also emerge from unexpected directions. For instance, Scott McMillin’s research on the procedures for training apprentices and rehearsing plays suggests that the master-apprentice relationship might have informed the performance of marriage. McMillin has speculated that, in some Shakespeare plays, the boy actors playing female parts respond to cues from – or give their cues to – one particular male actor who may also have been their master. As Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern elaborate,

Desdemona, in the second half of *Othello*, for instance, has more than half her lines exclusively ‘cued’ by Othello, and more than half her lines exclusively answered by Othello, perhaps because the boy player of ‘Desdemona’ was apprenticed to ‘Othello’, who ‘instructed’ her/him in reality as much as in the play. It might be that ‘new’ boy players were more likely to be given parts containing substantial sections in which they could be carefully instructed by a single person, while plays written for more practised boys were not similarly confined to dialogue with only a few people. (67–8)

Obviously, this is highly speculative. But its implications for the enactment of Othello and Desdemona’s marriage – the power dynamic, the closed circuit of their exchanges – are worth exploring.

In Shakespeare’s depictions of marriage, we can glimpse many hopeful possibilities. When Hymen joins ‘his’ hand to ‘his’ in the textual crux at the end of *As You Like It* what was long ‘emended’ as an error has recently been embraced as an opportunity.⁵ In *Merry Wives*, we see the possibility that same-sex attachments survive and coexist with – perhaps even animate and exist within – marriage and aren’t necessarily supplanted by it. In Beatrice and Benedick, we glimpse the possibility that spouses, whether of the same or opposite sexes, might be friends and lovers. Shakespeare is a resource for weddings because he provides a language for passionate desire, intimacy, attachment, and love. When Bruce Smith confides, parenthetically, that ‘let me not to the marriage of true minds’ was the icing on his wedding cake (181), he reminds us of the enduring power of that subjunctive, as well as the possibilities that flower when we revise our understanding of what our tradition includes, as Smith’s reading of the sonnets so powerfully does. Here, Shakespeare articulates and stands for a long history of recognizing that the marriage of true minds might occur between two men despite the fact that some still decry this as a dangerous innovation. But if Shakespeare’s words can be the icing on the

cake, the something old that anchors and authorizes what only appears new, they can also be the funeral baked meats coldly furnishing forth a marriage feast, leftovers that undermine the possibility of a new beginning. Sometimes one feels one has heard this story before. And it doesn't necessarily end well. There are erotic and affective possibilities for which Shakespeare isn't the script, the sanction, or the license. There are ways in which, as the actor playing Katherine puts it in Neil LaBute's bracing new frame for *The Taming of the Shrew*, 'we're done here'.⁶ And as a consequence, as the Carpenters used to promise at many a wedding, we've only just begun.

Short Biography

Frances E. Dolan is professor of English at the University of California, Davis. Before coming to Davis in 2003, she taught at Miami University, the University of Chicago, and Columbia University. She is the author of *Marriage and Violence: The Early Modern Legacy* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), *Whores of Babylon: Gender, Catholicism, and Seventeenth-Century Print Culture* (Cornell, 1999; paperback edition with new preface from University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), and *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550–1700* (Cornell, 1994). She is also the editor of *The Taming of the Shrew: Texts and Contexts* (Bedford, 1996), and of five plays for the New Pelican Shakespeare. She has held fellowships from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities (at the Newberry and Folger Libraries) and has served as Trustee and then President of the Shakespeare Association of America. Her degrees are from Loyola University in Chicago (BA) and from the University of Chicago (MA and PhD). She is currently working on *True Relations: Reading, Literature, and Evidence in Seventeenth-Century England*.

Notes

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¹ On challenges to Stone, see Orlin's helpful review essay.

² On making marriages, see Cook, Cressy, Giese, O'Hara, Sokol and Sokol. On the complex negotiations in early modern households, see Capp and Fletcher.

³ One example would be the otherwise excellent 2005 Shakespeare Santa Cruz production, directed by P. J. Paparelli.

⁴ Dympna Callaghan's reading of the Book of Common Prayer marriage ceremony as a 'script for cultural performance' reminds us that this script includes speaking roles for the priest, the two spouses, and the congregation, 'this company' who bear witness to the proceedings and have the opportunity to object (1–5).

⁵ On this textual crux, see Little, Maguire, and Masten. For an edition that does not 'emend' his, see mine for the New Pelican Shakespeare.

⁶ LaBute's frame was commissioned for the 2010 Chicago Shakespeare Theater production directed by Josie Rourke.

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