Love, sex, and marriage have been among the mainsprings of drama and literature in many cultures, but there were particular reasons why these themes should feature so strongly in the works of Shakespeare and his contemporaries. In Elizabethan and Jacobean England, the ‘family’—a term most commonly used at this time to denote a household, including servants as well as those united by ties of blood and marriage—was an institution of exceptional social importance. Not only was it the matrix of procreation and the education of the young, it was also at all social levels an important focus of economic activity, of production as well as consumption, and above all was the site for the exercise of patriarchal authority and the reproduction of age and gender hierarchies at a time when the law regarded women as ‘either married or to be married’. Sex, power, and money were thus intimately connected. The family household was also seen as the nursery of religion, while it was imagined by statesmen as a vital political institution. Referring to ‘private families’, an official document of around 1600 stated as simple fact that ‘on their good government the commonwealth depends’.

It followed that courtship and marriage formation were not only of emotional and personal significance, nor were they simply a family matter of great moment: they were also of prime public importance. By the same token, personal relationships within the household, above all between husband and wife, were seen as the key not only to personal happiness but also to good citizenship. ‘Necessary it is’, wrote the moralist William Gouge shortly after Shakespeare’s death, ‘that good order be first set in families: . . . good members of a family are like to make good members of church and commonwealth’.

The relationship between these pious principles and the foibles and frailties of human nature was inevitably problematic, and there was much scope for tension and conflict between the generations and between the genders. Moreover, although in general the importance of family and household was universally accepted, on particular issues there was debate and disagreement. Many of these controversies originated in or were fuelled by the Reformation, but they were given added urgency by economic and demographic pressures that, peaking in the decades around 1600, made governors and governed alike think hard about the social implications of sexual morality and the ethics of marriage. Problems were most acute, and the responses most elaborate, in
Courtship.

Couple embracing.

A wedding.

Fig. 1.2
towns and cities, above all in the rapidly growing metropolis. Moreover, the additional freedom and wider circle of acquaintance that London society offered wives and husbands, daughters and sons, created temptations that tested sexual and social mores to their limits. Shakespeare's London audiences must have been particularly attuned to the problems and controversies surrounding family, sex, and marriage, and were absorbed by them even though, in practice, the married state was not for everyone. Demographic calculations indicate that at any given moment in this period up to forty-five per cent of women were either not yet married or widowed, while the proportion of women who never married was on the increase and was to exceed one in five shortly after Shakespeare's death.  

Spousals and the law of marriage

Entry into the married state was less rigidly controlled than the importance of marriage and household might lead us to expect. Despite efforts to change the law in the sixteenth century, females could contract a valid marriage at the age of twelve and males at fourteen. Indeed it was possible for girls and boys to be betrothed from the age of seven, albeit with safeguards that allowed them the right to repudiate the union before they came of age. Although the practice was on the wane, such 'child marriages' did occasionally still take place in Shakespearian England. Teenage marriage, especially for girls, was certainly still commonplace among the nobility and gentry and other wealthy groups in Elizabeth's reign, though marriage ages tended to rise thereafter. It is true that most people married much later than the legal minimum, on average in the mid-late twenties. However, the mean conceals numerous local and individual variations, and it was by no means unusual for women to be married by the time they were twenty. Marriage at Juliet's tender age—not quite fourteen (Romeo and Juliet, 1.2.9, 1.3.11–19)—was at least imaginable in real life: writing in 1615, Alexander Niccholes reported with disapproval that the 'forward virgins' of the age claimed that thirteen or fourteen was the best time to marry.

In The Taming of the Shrew, Lucentio's servant tells him 'I knew a wench married in an afternoon as she went to the garden for parsley to stuff a rabbit' (4.5.23–4). Ecclesiastical law, which governed matrimonial matters, allowed a couple to contract a valid and binding union by means of a simple pledge made to each other in words of the present tense. The marriage did not depend on the consent of parents, the presence of witnesses, the participation of a clergyman, or a ceremony in church. Admittedly, the authorities had always recognized that this situation created enormous potential for confusion, deceit, and ill-advised action. So for centuries they had tried to insist that couples contemplating matrimony should secure the consent of parents or other relatives, publicize their intentions beforehand by the calling of 'hanns' (an announcement in church), and duly solemnize the marriage in the church in the
presence of a priest. While licences could be issued to dispense couples from some of these requirements, those who wilfully evaded them were subject to punishment: their unions were in contravention of the law while being at the same time valid and binding.

Luther and other reformers regarded this situation as scandalous and ungodly as well as confusing, and in most parts of Europe the law of marriage was clarified in the sixteenth century. Despite powerful calls for similar reforms in England, the law remained in essence unchanged. What did happen was that, as Elizabeth's reign progressed, the Church insisted more and more rigorously on safeguards to ensure publicity, due regard for parental consent, and the necessity of solemnization. Detailed regulations were codified in the ecclesiastical canons (ordinances) of 1604. Moreover, the church courts—which represented a powerful system of justice separate from the secular courts, dealing with a wide range of religious and moral issues as well as matrimonial matters—became increasingly reluctant to recognize unsolemnized unions. In any case common lawyers had long regarded the church ceremony as necessary to secure the right of a wife to dower (maintenance) after her husband's death. The impact of these changes is seen in the fact that lawsuits over disputed marriage contracts, which had been frequent in earlier centuries and were still quite numerous in many areas in the late sixteenth century, declined in number quite sharply after about 1600. By this time there is abundant evidence that the overwhelming majority of couples, whatever promises they entered into beforehand, intended ultimately to solemnize their union. When people spoke of 'marriage' they normally meant marriage in church; and it is apparent that Shakespeare's characters always seem to envisage some kind of religious ceremony.

But this did not solve all problems. Eloping couples could resort to what were called 'clandestine' marriages, which were conducted by a minister and normally took place in a church or chapel in the presence of witnesses, but which happened at irregular times and evaded other formalities designed to ensure adequate publicity. While it was not until the late seventeenth century that this practice became a national problem on a huge scale, it was already a growing trend in London and some other localities by 1600. Many of the matrimonial intrigues of Shakespeare's plays feature precisely such a ceremony. In The Taming of the Shrew Lucentio hears that 'The old priest at Saint Luke's church is at your command at all hours' (4.5.13–14; emphasis added).

It was also still common (though the custom was declining) for couples to make themselves 'sure' in advance of the church wedding, in a ritual of 'handfasting' or 'spousals'. In their most elaborate form, these ceremonies were the culmination of weeks or months of negotiation between the partners and their families. Such 'treaty and communication of marriage', in which go-betweens (like Viola/Cesario in Twelfth Night (1.4.12–41)) not infrequently played an important part, was commonly punctuated by mutual visits and the giving of such gifts or 'tokens' of marriage as gloves, scarves, trinkets, pieces of money, and rings. Discussions over the bride's 'portion' and other exchanges of land and goods were often conducted simultaneously. The
ceremony of handfasting might be presided over by a respected figure, perhaps even a priest, and family members were often present as witnesses and to give their blessing to the match. However, as the church wedding became ever more firmly established as the final step in the progress towards marriage, spousals tended to lose some of their ritual character and many, it would appear, were hardly more than promises to marry. The sheer diversity and ambiguity of practice—which inevitably led to dispute—is reflected not only in contemporary court records but also in Shakespearian drama, most notably in Measure for Measure (1.2.122–6; 3.1.210–12).

Courtship, consent, and constraint

Historians agree that simple models of ‘arranged’ or ‘free’ or ‘individualistic’ marriage are inapplicable to Shakespearian England. The far more subtle reality, that gave ample scope for dramatic treatment, encompassed a variety of circumstances in which flexibility and negotiation were more in evidence than rigid rules; and if few were married with no say in the matter, at the other end of the spectrum not many had a truly untrammeled choice. One constraint that bore hardly on the lower ranks was the principle that couples should have sufficient economic resources to maintain a household. This was among the reasons why marriage was forbidden to those in apprenticeship, and why, more generally, the marriage of the young was often viewed with disfavour. Even for those above the poverty line, accruing the means to finance a new household—whether through the inheritance of land or goods, the marriage portions that young women received from parents or other relatives, or careful savings of wages gained through service—was crucial to matrimonial calculations. A gradual increase in the size of dowries in the period may have made marriage increasingly difficult to attain for middling to poor women; at a different level of economic expectations, the inflation of portions among the aristocracy, gentry, and wealthy merchant classes made marriage a weighty matter for families with daughters to provide for.

At the highest social levels, marriage was important for not only financial but also dynastic and, sometimes, political reasons, and it was in these ranks that family influence in matchmaking was most powerful. Inevitably young girls were subject to the greatest pressures; as they grew older they were apt to develop not only minds of their own but also the means to exercise their will: hence the advice of the Isle of Wight gentleman Sir John Oglander to ‘marry thy daughters betimes, lest they marry themselves.’ Sons had more freedom of movement than daughters, if not freedom of action, and when they were of age were often expected to take an active part in marriage negotiations on their own account, albeit with due consultation with parents or other family members. Whatever the age or sex of the child, accepted wisdom held that they must be given at least some say in the choice of marriage partner, if only a
veto on someone who was utterly repugnant. The idea of voluntary acceptance was at
the heart of the law of marriage, and it was widely accepted that a sound and happy
union depended on the free consent of the couple.

Contemporary moralists inveighed against the wickedness of forced marriages, and
it was proverbial that such unions led to ruin. In 1606 George Wilkins, Shakespeare’s
sometime collaborator, dramatized the issue in The Miseries of Enforced Marriage. Yet
some parents insisted on their authority to the utmost—Sir Edward Coke, a leading
common law judge, was reputed to have bullied his daughter into marrying the
mentally unstable John Villiers by tying her to a bedpost and whipping her into sub-
mission. Against this background of conflicting social imperatives, Egeus’s attempt
to force his daughter Hermia to marry to his liking in A Midsummer Night’s Dream
(1.1.22–45) was a scene fraught with moral tension.

Lower down the social scale it was likewise accepted that children had a duty to
consult their parents about their marriage plans. Polixenes’ insistence in The Winter’s
Tale that a father

... should hold some counsel
In such a business

(4.4.397-8)

was conventional wisdom. Seeking the ‘good will’ or ‘blessing’ of father or mother was
a matter of prudence as well as courtesy and morality if the couple hoped to receive
money, land, or goods to enable them to set up a household, or even expected an
inheritance after their parents’ or other relatives’ deaths. On the other hand, prac-
ticalities tended to limit parental or other family influence. Men and women of the
lower middling groups and labouring poor were often of mature age before they could
reasonably hope to marry, by which time one or both parents might well be dead.
Their late teens and early twenties were characteristically spent as apprentices, house-
hold servants, or servants in husbandry. As such they were under the quasi-parental
authority of masters and mistresses—who themselves frequently took a part in mar-
riage negotiations, sometimes assuming a role in loco parentis. But they were often
remote from the direct influence of their natural families, and very much in contact
with other young people in household, workshop, street, fair, and market. Inevitably
they often took the initiative in finding partners and made what were essentially their
own choices.

Whatever the social level, there was no necessary conflict between the matrimonial
aspirations of young people and the wishes of their families. The contemporary ideal,
expressed in numerous sermons and conduct books, was marriage with the multi-
lateral consent of all the parties involved. All-round satisfaction was no doubt achieved
in many cases, if necessary after some give and take on both sides. But the tensions
implicit in this situation did sometimes explode into conflict. Church court lawsuits
over disputed marriage contracts reveal many cases where parents reacted angrily on
discovering that their offspring had attached themselves to partners of whom they
disapproved, and used all the means in their power, including moral pressure, financial inducements, and the threat of disinheritance to bring them back into line. The outcome of such suits suggests that parents were often successful in re-asserting their control in contests of this sort, and the same is indicated by an interesting set of cases reported by the astrological physician Richard Napier. To this extent parental and other family influence should not be underestimated. The vindictive rage of Polixenes when he discovers the marriage of his son Florizel to Perdita in *The Winter’s Tale* directs the audience's sympathy towards the young couple. But his exercise of parental authority was basically in tune with contemporary expectations.

Yet Florizel’s stance, or Hermia’s for that matter in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, would have likewise come as no surprise to the audience, because some individuals did defy their families. In a typical Wiltshire case in 1584, Emma Harrode said that she would marry Richard Browne ‘though all her friends would say nay thereunto and [they] should go a-begging together’. Defiance was sometimes aided by the fact that family and ‘friends’ were by no means always of one mind. While parents, especially fathers, normally had the greatest say, uncles and aunts, brothers and sisters, and even more distant relatives sometimes meddled in matchmaking, and might play a major role if one or both the parents were no longer alive. But the lack of any clear rules to govern the role of kinsfolk provided fertile ground for dispute and the possibility of playing one off against the other. Even husband and wife were not always in agreement on choice of marriage partner for their offspring. Thus in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* Anne Page was able to slide between the preferences of her parents to secure a clandestine ceremony—‘twixt twelve and one’, that is outside the canonical hours—with her true love Master Fenton (4.6.47-50).

The suitors favoured by Anne Page’s parents were preposterous. In real life parental choices could be quixotic or self-serving, which is why contemporaries could on occasion be sympathetic to defiant youngsters. But mostly, when parents objected to a match, it was because they were convinced that their offspring had made foolish choices that flew in the face of normal expectations. The most common complaint was that the individual in question was too poor or too lowly. Probably the most important factor that made youngsters themselves blind to material interests or family concerns was the power of love.

Admittedly the contemporary connotations of this term were different from those of today, and certainly emotion was only one element in a complex calculus. Thus men and women were often asked (or asked themselves) whether they could ‘find in their heart to love’ the other person; being ‘in love’ was not always expected. Nonetheless the rich vocabulary of emotion that is found in contemporary sources—‘love’, ‘fantasy’, ‘fancy’, ‘delight’, ‘dalliance’, ‘gestures of lovely liking’—indicates that love could indeed be a powerful, active force in real life as well as poetry and drama. If a union was in other respects satisfactory, love could be accepted as a positive sentiment that parents were willing to accommodate. In 1586, for example, a Wiltshire gentleman gave approval to his daughter’s choice of spouse to secure her ‘well bestowing . . .
to live in the world as also the satisfaction of her own fantasy, seeing the same so firmly
castened.5 On the other hand, such sentiments could be regarded as destructive or
'diseased' if they were seen to override prudential considerations. Some contem-
poraries believed that an unrequited lover might sicken or die of love: Rosalind's
statement in As You Like It, that 'men have died from time to time, and worms have
eaten them, but not for love' (4.1.91–2), was more controversial than it sounds.

Honour, honesty, and illicit sex

In Much Ado About Nothing, when Hero is at the very point of being married to Claudio,
he denounces her 'with public accusation, uncovered slander, unmitigated rancour' as
no maid, an 'approved wanton', a 'rotten orange' (4.1.30, 42, 302–3). A confronta-
tion of such compelling cruelty is the stuff of drama, not ordinary life. Yet in Shakespearian
England people of all social ranks often found their sexual honour or 'honesty' called
in question.

Women, defamed as 'whores'—a term used of any sexually transgressive female,
not just of prostitutes—were particularly vulnerable to sexual slander because of the
powerful operation of the double standard. But men were not altogether immune, and
faced biting accusations of 'whoremonger' or 'whoremaster'. Of course such epithets
were often employed as vulgar abuse, exploited for their emotive power in quarrels
and disputes that were not primarily about sexual reputation. But the context—the
counterpart of the stress on the sanctity of family and household—was a society in
which sexual morality was of immense social importance and sexual transgressions
were subject to legal penalty. The main agents of discipline, the church courts, could
not touch life, limb, or property but could punish by means of public penance: charac-
teristically dressed in a white sheet and carrying a white rod, penitents had to confess
their fault before the local church congregation. (Near the end of Shakespeare's life,
his son-in-law Thomas Quincy was ordered to do public penance for fathering an
illegitimate child, though in the event the sentence was commuted into a money
payment.)10 Secular agents, in the form of constables and justices of the peace, were
involved too; and many towns and cities claimed special powers to deal with sexual
offenders. This was among the functions of the London Bridewell, established in 1553:
culprits were whipped and incarcerated for short periods with hard labour. By ancient
custom, moreover, the Lord Mayor and Aldermen could order 'strumpets', 'whores',
and 'bawds' (males as well as females) to be carted through the city of London. These
powers were used primarily against the professionals of the sex trade—vividly evoked
in Shakespeare’s plays by figures such as Doll Tearsheet and Mistress Overdone—but
could be extended also to ordinary sex offenders. Fears of the 'pox' (syphilis) and other
diseases sharpened civic concerns.

Attempts to regulate sexual expression inevitably created tensions, reflected in
bawdy humour and sexual horseplay. Richard Fisher of Ely was reported around 1616
for abusing of himself in the church upon midsummer day in setting himself in the
lap of Margaret Woode, a maid, and most immodestly and unseemly . . . did pull up . . .
[her] clothes . . . to her great shame: . . . [and] did call unto . . . the clerk saying unto
him, "You see nothing"11—the same bawdy pun as Hamlet makes when, lying with his
head in Ophelia’s lap, he cruelly teases her with ‘country matters’ (Hamlet, 3.2.101–9).

Inevitably things did not always stop at words, and large numbers of actual sexual
transgressions came before the courts. They were not treated with equal severity, not
least because the complexities of marriage law blunted moral disapproval in certain
cases. Some people believed, or purported to do so, that a binding marriage contract
licensed sexual relations because the couple were ‘man and wife before God’. Thus, in
Measure for Measure, the Duke can plausibly if tendentiously assure Mariana that Angelo

. . . is your husband on a pre-contract.
To bring you thus together ‘tis no sin
(4.1.68–9)

Others seem to have felt that, at most, such circumstances did but ‘extenuate the
forehand sin’ as Claudio puts it in Much Ado About Nothing (4.1.48). In any case, it
is clear that for many couples, whether contracted or not, restraints on sexuality
crumbled when marriage was in sight. Parish register analysis indicates that at least a
fifth of all brides in Shakespearean England were pregnant when they came to be
married in church, though the pre-nuptial chastity of women in the upper ranks of
society was more closely guarded. Though common, bridal pregnancy was becoming
less acceptable as time went on. In the closing years of the sixteenth century the
church courts began to prosecute couples for this transgression, and the trend
intensified after 1600.

There was a thin line between sex in anticipation of marriage and simple fornication,
that is, sexual relations between people who did not intend or had no realistic hope
of marriage; and, in a society in which contraceptive and abortifacient techniques
were not universally known and haphazardly employed, illegitimate births were the
inevitable result. The extent of illegitimacy varied regionally and over time. More
common in the ‘highland zone’ of western and north-west England, in the south-east
the ratio of bastard births peaked at about three per cent in the decades around 1600.
Coinciding with and partly conditioned by the harsh economic conditions of those
years, which frustrated the marriage plans of many poor people and dislocated court-
ships to an unusual extent, illegitimacy raised the fears of local communities who
experienced poor bastard births as yet another charge on the rates that parishes had to
levy to relieve the poor. Economics thus sharpened moral concerns. Already subject
to church court censures, and sometimes carted or whipped in the towns, by an act of
1576 the parents of poor bastard children could be punished by the Justices of the
Peace, while in 1610 it was laid down that the mothers of bastard children should be
incarcerated for a year in the local house of correction.
There were calls for harsher punishments yet, for this and other sexual transgressions. In this period the most severe punishment was reserved not for heterosexual offences but for ‘buggery committed with mankind [sodomy] or beast [any intercourse with an animal]’. However, prosecutions for either activity were few, and particularly rare in the case of sodomy. The fact is that, though the erotic charge of same-sex relationships crackles through some of the literature of the period, evidence from which to gauge the extent of actual practice is meagre in the extreme. Sodomy—which was not necessarily thought to be inconsistent with heterosexual behaviour—might be execrated as the ultimate ‘sin against nature’, but the other sexual transgressions were generally of more immediate and practical concern to contemporary moralists and provoked the loudest demands for punitive action. In 1583 the Puritan popularizer Philip Stubbes suggested that ‘the man or woman who are certainly known ... to have committed the horrible fact of whoredom, adultery, incest, or fornication, either should drink a full draught of Moses’ cup, that is, taste of present death ...; or else, if that be thought too severe ... then would God they might be cauterized and seared with a hot iron on the cheek, forehead, or some other part of their body’. This was by no means a lone voice. By this period there was a long tradition of calling for the death penalty, especially in the case of adultery. Not only had this offence been singled out for severe treatment in Old Testament law; in contemporary eyes it was particularly abhorrent as a cause of strife and disruption of households, and (when committed by women) as an act that might pervert the inheritance of property. *Measure for Measure* must be understood in the light of these debates.

**Marital relations and marriage breakdown**

Divorce in the modern sense, with the right to remarry, did not exist in Shakespearian England, though the matter was controversial: the fact that unions could be broken only by death gave added weight to the importance of marital relations. While such relations were a less central theme of Shakespeare’s plays than courtship and the marriage quest, they were important nonetheless, and there are also some poignant evocations of the ties between parents and small children, as in *Macbeth* (4.2.30–85) and *The Winter’s Tale* (1.2.121–211; 2.1.1–34). The long-cherished notion that family relations were for the most part cold and severely authoritarian has now been discarded by historians. Letters, diaries, wills, and legal records provide abundant evidence of warm and loving sentiments both between husbands and wives and parents and children; they indicate that wives expected to be treated fairly and kindly; and they testify to the often powerful feelings of grief that were experienced when these relationships were prematurely ruptured by death.

Yet things could easily go wrong, in part as a corollary of some of the characteristics
of contemporary courtship and matchmaking. The emphasis on marriage as an economic union cut both ways: while it could ballast the relationship, troubles could ensue if material expectations were disappointed. Prevailing patriarchal prescriptions, moreover, imposed strains on both sides. Churchmen denounced wife-beating as irrational and unmanly, but the repetition of this message suggests that many husbands thought differently: indeed the law itself allowed that ‘the husband hath dominion over his wife, and may keep her by force within the bounds of duty, and may beat her’. Although such ‘correction’ was not to be administered in ‘a violent and cruel manner’, it was inevitable that the husband’s authority sometimes degenerated into cruel tyranny enforced by fist, cudgel, and rope. Wives who were severely mistreated could sue for separation on the grounds of cruelty. In practice few did so, but the cases that did come before the courts bear witness to the hell that some women must have experienced.

On the other hand, men feared, but were also fascinated by, the sharpness of women’s tongues. It was proverbial that ‘Every man may tame a shrew but he who hath her’; and there was an extensive literature on the theme of scolding women, of which Shakespeare’s The Taming of the Shrew was a sophisticated example. A man who so failed to live up to patriarchal expectations that he allowed himself to be beaten by his wife was even more abject. This was the signal for a ‘riding’ or ‘skimmington ride’: a mocking demonstration by the neighbours of the topsy-turvy couple, who in person, in effigy, or by proxy were paraded on a horse or ridden on a ‘cowlstaff’ (carrying pole) to the ‘rough music’ of pots and pans, drums and pipes, or even gunfire. While this motif is never directly represented in Shakespeare, there are echoes in plays as diverse as The Merry Wives of Windsor (3.3.115–24) and The Winter’s Tale (2.3.75–6, 91–3).

More fully explored are the permutations—tragic and comic, psychological and situational—on the much more common fate of cuckoldry. In this patriarchal society, a man whose wife had been unfaithful—implying not only sexual inadequacy but also inability to govern his household—was commonly the object of contempt and derision. He might find horns, the ancient symbol of cuckoldry, hung on his gate or gable; in any event he was liable to be taunted by neighbours or street urchins, joking at his expense or making horn signs with their fingers. Yet no doubt some wore their horns philosophically enough, though Lavatch’s *apologia* for the cuckold’s state in *All’s Well that Ends Well* (1.3.37–48) is a shade too paradoxical. The best way of deflecting the sting of cuckoldry was to take firm action. A wife’s adultery was grounds for separation, and the Earl of Northumberland’s robust view was that ‘there can no dishonour rise to a man by a woman’s whoredom, being separated’.11 Separation suits were not numerous, but they did occur; and one of the attractions of proposals that adultery should be made a capital offence was that it would enable men not only to get rid of unfaithful wives but also leave them free to marry again. In 1604 a bill was actually introduced into the Lords ‘for the better repressing of the detestable crime of adultery’, which got as far as a second reading but was abandoned because it was found
'rather to concern some particular persons than the public good'. Leontes' tyrannical arraignment of Hermione in The Winter's Tale (3.2.1-121) was no means complete fantasy.

Conclusion

Matters to do with courtship, sex, and marriage were well adapted to appeal to the whole range of Shakespeare's audiences—from the court itself through the well-heeled clientele of the hall theatres to the varied social scene of the Theatre or the Globe. Shot through with ambiguities of attitude and expectation, these themes were, in a time of rapid legal and social change, the subject of intense debate; and, spiced with mordant, often bawdy wit, Shakespeare's prose and poetry deftly yet relentlessly explored the dramatic confrontations and psychological tensions inherent in these subjects. While many of the issues still have enormous resonance in the present day, they can be fully understood only in the very different cultural context of Shakespeare's own time.

FURTHER READING

Adair, Richard. Courtship, Illegitimacy and Marriage in Early Modern England (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996). This study of regional variations in illegitimacy rates suggests that they may be related to differences in courtship and marriage practices.


Carlson, Eric Josef. Marriage and the English Reformation (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994). This work is notable in linking law, theology, and popular practice, drawing on a wide range of sources including church court records.

Cressy, David. Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). This richly detailed survey of the ritual and ceremonies associated with the rites of passage includes much material relevant to the themes of courtship, sex, marriage, household, and family.


Ingram, Martin. *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Focusing mainly on Wiltshire, this study deals with the work of the church courts, with particular attention to suits over disputed marriage contracts, separation and divorce, prosecutions for sexual transgressions, and sexual slander.

Stone, Lawrence. *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977). This seminal work has been much criticized for its over-schematic account of changes in the family and for under-estimating the role of affective relationships in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but is nonetheless still worth reading, especially for its account of upper-class experiences.

**NOTES**

9. Ibid., p. 142.