

The battle of the sexes was fought just as vigorously in the seventeenth century as it is being fought today. And nobody does it better than Shakespeare. So sit back and see how one uh, *loving*, couple resolve their different attitudes toward the "proper" role of men and women in *The Taming of the Shrew*. Then get a different take on the subject in *Love's Labor's Lost*. Since both plays revolve around love and marriage, let's start with a look at the state of holy matrimony in the seventeenth century.



Fire at Will

Although *The Taming of the Shrew* is set in Italy, Shakespeare was using the attitudes and customs of his own native England rather than those of Italy.



Sweets to the Sweet

Although secret marriages without church ceremonies were legal, getting married according to Hoyle helped ensure that the right of primogeniture (inheritance) would be strictly observed.

I Do, I Do

In Shakespeare's day, marriage fell under the jurisdiction of the Church of England. As a result, church law and civil law were one and the same. Church law governed the method of engagement and the wedding ceremony. *The Taming of the Shrew* shows a legal engagement to marry. Kate and Petruchio join hands before Baptista, Kate's father. The bridegroom expresses his wish to be married on the following Sunday, the father gives his consent, and two buddies act as witnesses. This is a perfectly legal engagement in seventeenth century England. Kate doesn't actually agree to the deal, but silence was taken as consent. It was almost impossible to break an engagement, except in certain cases of adultery before the actual church ceremony.

The actual wedding ceremony follows the ritual of the Church of England as laid down in the Book of Common Prayer. All marriages were supposed to take place in church, usually the bride's parish church. The church ceremony began with the priest asking if there was any known impediment to the match. The couple then exchanged vows and rings, and the groom could kiss his bride. To close the ceremony, the couple drank a glass of wine in which pieces of cake had been soaked. Then came a feast marked by bawdy merrymaking at the newlyweds' expense.

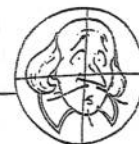
Like a Virgin

Today we have Dear Abby and Miss Manners to give us advice; the Elizabethans had marriage manuals. According to these guidebooks, a lady seeking to enter the state of wedded bliss must be:

- Virtuous
- Silent
- Obedient to her parents
- Modest

A lady never showed that she wanted to get married since that indicated willfulness—as well as immodesty in wishing to lose her virginity. Also, she was not to offer an opinion in the choice of a husband, but instead was to entrust the choice to her parents, with the notion that they knew much better than she what was good for her.

A young man, however, was to look carefully at his proposed bride, picking her for compatibility and domestic virtues, as well as for her equality with him in age, rank, and wealth. A rich heiress was a great prize; a wealthy widow the same as a winning lottery ticket. When it was all said and done, marriages often took place for money, money, and more money. In *The Taming of the Shrew*, we see this in Baptista, who first considers the economic advantages of a match.



Fire at Will

Although church law insisted on the free consent of the married, there were many instances of forced marriage. The ideal was a marriage of mutual respect; love would come later. But reality rarely collides with the ideal, and many young women were entrapped into unwanted marriages by the political and economic ambitions of their parents.

The Stepford Wives

After marriage, the wife should be just as obedient to her husband as she had been to her parents. She should mirror or sympathize with his every mood and carry out his wishes. Her duties would be primarily domestic, so she wouldn't have to worry her pretty little head about her husband's business. In turn, hubby would have complete control over his wife's money and property, and also over her person. Some writers even contended that he had the right to beat her if she proved recalcitrant.

But you can't keep 'em down on the farm once they've seen gay Paree. Some Elizabethan women were being educated and feeling their freedom. The so-called "new woman" of the Renaissance considered herself almost the equal of men and refused to be treated as the household chattel that advocates of male superiority wished her to be. We see this in the beginning of *The Taming of the Shrew* in Kate and sister Bianca. Their opposition of character represents the conflict of attitudes found in sixteenth century England.



Star Quality

Here are two famous lines that trace their birth to Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*: "I'll not budge an inch" and "There's small choice in rotten apples."