

# Was Romantic Love the Driving Force Behind Marriage Formation in Early Modern England?

In the modern era, it is widely accepted that the main driving force for marriage formation is romantic love. Yet, for English couples looking to marry in the Early Modern period, matters were complicated by an array of factors, such as social class, family interference and economic standing. The importance of studying this topic stems from England's status as one of the most progressive countries in Europe at this time, in terms of romantic marriages and the relative freedom to choose loving partners in different social circles.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, if there are any countries in which passionate marriages were formed at this time, England would be an example we can draw the most information from. The importance of family influence and their social standings are explored in this piece, along with romantic love, as these were some of the main criteria identified by Houlbrooke in the making of an ideal Early Modern marriage.<sup>2</sup> This piece will consider what importance each criterion had in the making of an Early Modern marriage and how these factors interacted (or conflicted) with one another. Although some historians have drawn similarities between marriage in the modern era and the Early Modern period,<sup>3</sup> it is important to consider the institution of marriage in this period as completely different to today, in order to come to effective conclusion to the question. Considering the evidence in this piece, it can be argued that romantic love was the main driving force behind marriage in Early Modern England, and the other factors, such as social

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Stone, *The Family Sex and Marriage in England: 1500-1800* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 219-220.

Lawrence Stone, *Uncertain Unions: Marriage in England, 1660-1753* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> Ralph A. Houlbrooke, *English Family Life, 1576-1716: An Anthology from Diaries* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publishers, 1988), pp. 73-74.

<sup>3</sup> Joanne Bailey, *Unquiet Lives: Marriage and Marriage Breakdown in England, 1660-1800*, ed. by Anthony Fletcher, John Guy, and John Morrill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 2.

standing and financial resources, acted as antagonistic elements which may have constrained freedom of choice, rather than being driving forces in their own right.

Romantic love in the Early Modern period was considered to be one of the essential components of a successful marriage, but the definition of the word 'love' was open to interpretation, covering aspects such as friendship and companionship as well as romantic connection.<sup>4</sup> This concept of romantic love being a deciding factor in marriage formation shows a progression from previous eras, in which love was considered to be a product of a marriage, rather than a prerequisite – and a move towards choosing partners on the basis of 'emotional satisfaction' rather than wealth or status was observed.<sup>5</sup> It is well-documented that romantic love played a significant role in marriage formation at this time, but whether it was actually the driving force is still very much open to debate. It is also important to remember that the practice of marriage formation in this period often differed to the theory laid out by moral practitioners in legislature or instructional literature, and regardless of any so-called moral constraints, romantic love was still widespread at this time, just like any other natural human emotion.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it is very difficult to define romantic love as the driving force for marriage in a catch-all manner, as each marriage (indeed, each romantic relationship) would have been unique, dependent on its circumstances, as much as it is today.

Society's attitude to romantic love, however, can be documented in a number of different ways, including popular culture. Macfarlane describes romantic love and the resulting conflicts as 'the most important single element dominating the plots'<sup>7</sup> in many dramatic works, which shows love to be an important subject in social conversation – and it

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<sup>4</sup> Houlbrooke, *English Family Life*, p.76.

<sup>5</sup> Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage*, p.217.

<sup>6</sup> Alan MacFarlane, *Marriage and Love in England: Modes of Reproduction, 1300-1840* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publishers, 1986), p.175.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.184.

seems that this is translated into the making of marriage as a major factor. Macfarlane, along with Lawrence Stone, stresses the effect that romantic love had in society at the time, stating that feelings of love could lead to genuine psychosis,<sup>8</sup> and other medical ailments, owing to its status as the strongest of the human passions.<sup>9</sup> This would suggest that romantic love would be powerful force behind the making of marriage, purely because of the way in which it seemed to affect the human psyche in this period – documented cases of romantic love causing illness does well to suggest that there was little that could be done to stop such feelings in this period.

There is also evidence to suggest that romantic love was a stronger factor in marriage retention than financial value. As Stone points out, George Farquhar’s successful stage work *The Beaux Stratagem* tells of the return of a wife’s marriage portion, totalling ten thousand pounds, after the husband fails to fulfil her needs for romance and companionship – which ‘is clearly regarded as no more than moral justice’ by Early Modern audiences.<sup>10</sup> This would suggest that, while financial contributions in the form of marriage portions were important in brokering some marriage contracts, they were not the basis from which marriages were formed and maintained. The importance of romantic love is substantiated by Khandelwal, but she maintains that a lot of the time, romantic love was embraced in marriage for ‘various reasons’, depending on the case, but was regarded nonetheless as a necessity in the making of marriage.<sup>11</sup> This would suggest that romantic love was important in marriage to varying degrees and for various reasons, so it would be almost impossible to formulate a “one size fits all” description of the role of love in marriage – but it can be asserted with authority that

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<sup>8</sup> Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage*, pp.219-220.

<sup>9</sup> Macfarlane, *Marriage and Love*, pp.205-206.

<sup>10</sup> Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage*, p.218.

<sup>11</sup> Meena Khandelwal, ‘Arranging Love: Interrogating the Vantage Point in Cross-Border Feminism’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 34 (2009), 583–609 (p.587).

romantic love was still ever-present as an important pillar of marriage at this time, regardless of its mitigating factors.

Despite the apparent power of romantic love in this period, matching couples for the purpose of marriage was not without its constraints – perhaps the greatest of which was social class, and the intertwined economic factors that came with it. This particularly affected the upper classes and nobility, as fewer suitable matches – as a result of social status and geographical location – led to marriage at a later age for most eligible bachelors in the higher social ranks.<sup>12</sup> Social class was also a factor in determining families' financial contribution to prospective marriages as well, with the higher-class families of brides tending to pay 'between £1000 and £5000,' in contrast to daughters of small-time farmers and husbandmen, who contributed 'between £10 and £15.'<sup>13</sup> From this evidence, it would be perfectly reasonable to suggest that because of social constraints, successful marriages in the upper classes were much harder to achieve, as the pressures to find a partner matching their social rank was greater than those in the classes below, compounded with the fact that there were simply fewer people in the elite ranks, greatly narrowing the pool of potential partners.

Nevertheless, that is not to say that the situation was not complicated for families from all social classes – in fact, families of all social classes encountered problems when it came to finding suitable matches as the 'conflicting ideals of patriarchy and idealism' came to a head in this period.<sup>14</sup> This would suggest that people were tending to break away from the socially prescribed ideals of marrying within their station, but – as O'Hara asserts – it seems that many couples set out to find the ideal balance between romantic attraction and

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<sup>12</sup> Ralph A. Houlbrooke, *The English Family, 1450-1700* (New York: Longman, 1984), p.65.

<sup>13</sup> Bailey, pp.85-86.

<sup>14</sup> Stone, *Uncertain Unions*, pp.12-13.

parity of rank,<sup>15</sup> which implies that couples were not willing to break completely from traditional values when choosing a partner. With that being said, it seems that romantic love and traditional values were both considered in conjunction with one another when many young people in this period were finding a marriage partner, as more of a balanced consideration. Romantic love still seemed to be driving force in this period, with parity of social becoming a mitigating factor, rather than a driving element in itself – as many still had the freedom to choose their partners, as long as they came from the appropriate pool of candidates.

Social constraints were not completely restricted to societal rank, however, and perception of the individual (especially the husband) in their ability to be an effective household head was also scrutinised in assessing their aptitude as part of a married couple.<sup>16</sup> Among these many competencies was personal financial worth, rather than that of the family they came from. One notable case of this is the engagement of Elizabeth Dodshon and Thomas Haswell, both of County Durham – their betrothal was terminated by the latter, when it transpired that the former had previously concealed debts that she was unable to pay.<sup>17</sup> This termination of engagement was upheld by an ecclesiastical court run by the Quakers, showing that this level of financial deceit was legally-recognised grounds for such a termination, and goes beyond just being regarded as social convention. This was also reflected in the marriage of Seaman Edward Barlow, who – despite proposing to his love interest – made an issue of her lack of wealth and possessions.<sup>18</sup> Although it did not become a deal-breaker in their marriage, Barlow felt that it was of enough note to raise in his diary, perhaps as a reference to

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<sup>15</sup> Diana O’Hara, *Courtship and Constraint: Rethinking the Making of Marriage in Tudor England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p.6.

<sup>16</sup> Alexandra Shepard, *Meanings of Manhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 70.

<sup>17</sup> Bailey, pp. 86-87.

<sup>18</sup> Houlbrooke, *English Family Life*, p. 34.

prescribed social attitudes or, indeed, his own preference on a choice of partner.

This goes to show that there is more than one documented case in which individual financial worth has been a considered factor in the formation of a marriage, and this would suggest that although romantic love was a prominent factor in finding a marriage partner in this period, this factor was curtailed – but not entirely defeated – by the issues of individual and familial finances, as well as parity of social rank. There are, of course, many other desirable skills and traits that would have appealed to potential husbands or wives, but many of these could not have been measured in the quantitative nature that personal finances could – to historians, this can prove problematic and may lead to inaccuracies or purely anecdotal evidence with little historical substance.

Of course, the constraints for young couples looking to marry were not strictly financial – the influence of family members and members of their communities likewise played a part in marriage formation in the Early Modern period. Although not considered a driving force in the making of marriage, family and community influence provided balancing factors to counteract the role of romantic love – the ideal match would be one which was able to satisfy all parties rather than sacrifice one criterion over another.<sup>19</sup> At this time, however, it seems as if things were not as clear cut – as Stone describes a drastic progression regarding attitudes on the issue throughout the Early Modern period. He states that at the start of this period, pressure and influence from family and the surrounding community was ‘all but irresistible,’ still the rise of individualism in most social circles allowed to more flexibility when it came to this process by the end of the Eighteenth Century.<sup>20</sup>

Conversely, there is evidence to suggest that earlier in the Early Modern period, families still did not have complete control over the marriages of their children – shown in

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<sup>19</sup> O’Hara, p. 32.

<sup>20</sup> Stone, *Uncertain Unions*, p.8.

the marriage of Sir John Oglander's youngest daughter in 1649. Despite his doubts about the match, he gives them their blessing and states '*Melius est obliuisci, quod non potest recuperari,*' which roughly translates to 'It is better to forget that which cannot be recovered.'<sup>21</sup> This shows that although, as the father of the bride-to-be, he has the ability to protest the match, instead he accepts that any potential protest would be unlikely to have any effect on his daughter's eventual decision to marry. The way in which romantic love remains unaffected by the father's disapproval of the match is not something that would happen in every such case, but the fact that there is evidence of it happening goes to show that family influence (especially of elders) was not always strong enough to overcome the driving force of romantic love in this period.

How a person was viewed within their own community would have an effect on their prospects of finding a suitable marriage partner, given the close-knit nature of towns and villages in the Early Modern period – reputation and how society viewed a person's moral conduct could be a constraining factor on marriage formation.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, although many teenagers and young adults were relatively free to form romantic relationships with the opposite sex, lack of financial independence meant staying celibate for a long while before being deemed by society to be ready to marry.<sup>23</sup> Although it was expected that both young men and women would eventually find a partner and settle down, Wrightson argues that marriage formation at this time was 'a privilege rather than a right,'<sup>24</sup> therefore potential marriages could be influenced or even prevented by members of the community, if they so desired.

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<sup>21</sup> 'The Marriage of Sir John Oglander's Youngest Daughter in 1649' Houlbrooke, *English Family Life*, p.18.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Carlton, 'The Widow's Tale: Male Myths and Female Reality in 16th and 17th Century England', *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 10 (1978), 118–29 (p. 121).

<sup>23</sup> Houlbrooke, *English Family Life*, p.15.

<sup>24</sup> Keith Wrightson, *English Society, 1580-1680* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), p.70.

Despite this, the family was considered ‘fundamental’ to the progression of society, so family formation under adequate moral standards were welcomed, and matches were not rejected by society without (supposed) good reason.<sup>25</sup> Society’s influence was a constraining factor on the individual choice of young couples, but it can be suggested that its influence was seldom strong enough to fully stifle many controversial marriages, due to the presence of Clandestine Marriage in Early Modern England – which offered a way around things if constitutional marriage was prevented. Yet, constitutional marriage has been the main focus of this piece, and the influence of the community does not appear strong enough to prevent a potential marriage, unless there was the legal authority to do so, in cases such as bigamy or incest. Community influence can definitely be seen as a factor in marriage formation, but perhaps not as one so strong as the influence of the family, or their social standing. Most community influence would occur in cases of accusations of immoral behaviour, which would in turn affect a person’s prospect of finding a marriage partner.

From the evidence considered, it can be suggested that romantic love was the main driving force behind marriage in Early Modern England, but this romantic love and individualistic desire to choose partner did not come without its constraints. Social class, wealth and the community’s attitude towards the engaged couple did play a part in marriage formation, though acted more as a counterbalance to romantic love, rather than being driving forces themselves. This level of individualistic freedom did vary between the social classes, but in a general sense, the freedom of choice enjoyed by Early Modern couples was relatively high, in comparison with earlier generations. The progression observed in this period also meant that marriage was becoming more and more geared towards romantic love and freedom of choice, which suggests that romantic love was not only the driving force for

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<sup>25</sup> Wrightson, *English Society*, p.66.



marriage formation, but also the driving force for progression and change to this social convention. While these are general observations, it is important to remember the variations displayed in this subject area, when it comes to the marriages of different couples. While some marriages were prevented by financial situation or social standing, some marriages carried on regardless of these factors, driven by romantic love and little else. This notion means that it is difficult to define driving forces of marriage, because of the unique nature of each marriage and its context – but in a more general sense, romantic love’s role in marriage formation can be strongly argued to be a driving force.

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