



It is difficult for us today to imagine the social expectations for men and women in Elizabethan England. To supply our imaginations with vivid details we turn to documents—sermons, ballads, and treatises written from 1553-1774—that reveal in authentic voices the rules in place for marriage partners. Reading historical documents gives a sort of jaw-dropping pleasure of discovery, and finding documents does the same, but with more labor in the pursuit.

We found these excerpts in Fran Dolan's *The Taming of the Shrew: Texts and Contexts* and in Russ McDonald's *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare* (both available from Bedford Books). The bibliographies in these books serve as an excellent launchpad for further research.

Instructions for Early Modern Marriage Partners

In Shakespeare's day, and the days following, marriage partners heard much advice—from parsons in the pulpit, from authors of conduct books, from family members. Read the excerpts below. Look up words you don't know. Then do one or more of the following:

1. *With acting partners, create and present a short scene that shows a view of married life based on these precepts.*
2. *Find out more about family life in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England and compile an instruction book based on your findings.*

If you share a bed with another man, keep still.

Take care not to annoy him or expose yourself by abrupt movements.

And if he is asleep, see that you do not wake him. . .

—Pierre Broé, *Of Good Manners and Proper Behavior*, 1555

But to this prayer must be joined a singular diligence, whereof St. Peter giveth his precept, saying: "You husbands deal with your wives according to knowledge giving honor to the wife, as unto the weaker vessel, and as unto them that are heirs also of the grace of life that your prayers be not hindered." This precept doth particularly pertain to the husband. For he ought to be the leader and author of love in cherishing and increasing concord, which then shall take place if he will use measurableness and not tyranny, and if he yield some things to the woman. For the woman is a weak creature, not endued with like strength and constancy of mind.

—from an Anglican Church sermon, 1563

Then was the scold herself
In a wheel-barrow brought,
Stripped naked to the smock,
As in that case she ought.
Neats' tongues about her neck
Were hung in open show.
And thus unto the cucking stool
This famous scold did go.

—excerpt from a ballad, circa 1615 describing "cucking," the practice of putting a scold (a woman who offends against public order by her speech) in a chair and dunking her into the river.

Many a husband because the wife's office is especially to abide at home will put off all government to the wife: leaving it to her not only to order the things in the house but also to bring in all needful things, to order and govern the children both old and young, yea even to provide for them also, to take in, to put out, to use all sorts of servants as pleaseth her. . . Oh base-minded men, unworthy to be husbands and heads of wives!

—William Gouge, *Of Domestical Duties: Eight Treatises*, 1634

When you have awakened and had sufficient time to rest, you should get out of bed with fitting modesty and never stay in bed holding conversations or concerning yourself with other matters . . . nothing more clearly indicated indolence and frivolity; the bed is intended for bodily rest and for nothing else.

—Jean Baptiste de la Salle, *The Rules of Decency and Christian Manners*, 1774