

*Marriage and Love in England 1300-1840*

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A rising economy, eliminating poverty, and a comfortable life have been the objectives of countries from the beginning. Personal motives play the biggest role in achieving a stable life. In *Marriage and Love in England 1300-1840* Alan McFarlane argues that people wanted to postpone marriage to make a better life for themselves. Four conditions encouraged the English to refrain from an early marriage and make England into a developed country: lower ranked people sought to improve their status; the foundation of private property existed; a general standard of living was above subsistence; and people pursued economic gain with capitalism.

English society was all about status; people were always trying to improve. They could give into their urges and get married but they would decrease their class in life. It was easy for a laborer to fall into poverty. Generally a man would end up giving himself greater problems and harder labor. Furthermore, children would have fewer chances for education and improvement in society if they have to start so low and with nothing.

Another improvement that kept the English from marrying early was instituting private property. McFarlane states that if everyone was equal and there was no fight for your own property then something worse would keep the population in check. People would end up relying on 'vice' or 'misery' to control the population and keep everyone in poverty (p.15). There was a strong yearning for bettering conditions and showing off public wealth, which led to postponing marriage. The author sums it up by affirming, "People would be less prepared to risk all by marriage (p.15)."

Also around this time the general standard of living had been improving and people had grown to appreciate small comforts in life and the 'advantages of civilization' (p.18). The English began accepting a living standard well above the basics; they

expected free time, privacy, warmth, good food, and because of this they held back from early reproduction. If they lost this good living, the population would become unhappy and problems would arise. McFarlane discussed the difference between the English poor and the Irish poor, The “English had grown to think of minor comforts as necessary (p.18).” Also you had to consider the children’s cost financially to the father and physically to the mother. People were giving up a lot to start a family.

Finally, people were pursuing economic advancement through capitalism. The price was to have later marriages. With a division of labor, competition in the work place, new markets, inventions, and ideas; the struggle for survival was prominent. Capitalism caused economic development as a “system of marital choice, weighing of costs and benefits, battle between biology and economics, constant striving and maneuvering which dragged mankind painfully up the spiral of wealth (p.323).”

There were three weaknesses which undermined the thesis. First of all the freedom to decide who you would marry sometime caused early unions. The ability to pick your own partner through ‘love’ is very western and a big change from most countries and times (p.122). Children did not need their parents consent to marry. In fact, “a marriage wasn’t valid with out the free consent of the parties in the contract themselves (p.129).” The problem is that the young are dreamers and this gives them the ability to make huge mistakes, like marrying too early.

A second weakness is that people wanted to have children who provided insurance. The world is an uncertain place with poverty, accidents, and illness, but children provided some insurance coverage. According to McFarlane children owed their parents, “His parents bare with him when a child, he bears his parent if twice a child

(107)". Therefore it is not difficult to see why children were wanted as support in your old age. Also it is a pleasure to have a family, the whole world knows it. The author stated that "wives and children are wealth and happiness (p.36)," a reason to not postpone marriage.

The last weakness in the thesis is the importance of romance or the 'passion between the sexes' (p.18). Not only for the friendship and combining of the soul, mind, and body, but to, "at all times be able to open my mind with freedom (p.191)." The husband and wife relationship became more important than the parent and child relationship. Also, the idea of monogamy, not used in a lot of places at this time, makes the meeting of two souls more realistic. The main idea was to be married as friends and have stability and happiness. Marriage was 'a heaven in a heartless world (p. 176)', and to have someone was to never face the burden of solitude. Fear was another reason to find the right partner early.

There were strengths for waiting for marriage; it was an irrevocable decision; the dowry was costly; and the serious challenges of marriage. First, the English knew that marriage was a long lasting decision. People did not want to venture lightly into this new world of marriage. The marriage age was flexible and there was no need to hurry to the altar. McFarlane explains it as a, "compromise between economic necessities and psychological and biological pressures (p.321)." There was an advantage in waiting and not rushing.

There was also another check on marriage that occurred within the families. Even though people could choose their own partners, the family had to pay a dowry for a woman to get married. When a young woman married it cost her family, and if she

married into a rich family, it would cost them even more. If she chose to marry young she would have to give up the chance of a large sum and therefore would bring less to the marriage. Sometimes the woman would have to work to save money to get married. This check made young ladies think of the consequences before following their hearts.

The last strength of waiting to marry was that, “love is one thing, marriage another (p.218).” To be in love or daydream about marriage is far from the actuality of it. Marriage took a lot more work, especially after children were born. Children were more of a consequence than a purpose; marriage without children was not an option. To move away from family, to give to another unselfishly requires much from an individual. Marriage is the start of a new life and this significance kept people thinking before acting.

The English improved their lives by waiting to marry. They knew the benefits of an unequal society, private property, a better standard of living, and pursuing wealth. While there were incentives for early marriage, overall marriages were postponed and England was a happier and more stable country.