Marriage and Love in Elizabethan England

It is generally considered foolish to marry for love, although love may occur in marriage.

Your parents and friends are better equipped than you are to look out for your best interests, being mature and experienced in the world. Let them negotiate and recommend and you're much more likely to be happy in marriage.



Just because a marriage is arranged doesn't mean you've never met the other person. Except among the lofty nobility, most people arrange their children's marriages with the children of neighbors and friends.

The lower on the social scale you are, the more likely you are to have a choice in the matter.

Exemplary (and disastrous) love matches: Robert Dudley and Amy Robsart; Lord Darnley and Mary Queen of Scots; Edward earl of Oxford and Anne Cecil.

Rare successful love matches: the 7th Baron and Lady Berkeley; the 2nd Earl of Bedford and his 3rd countess.

**Children**

Everyone wants (and expects) to have children.

Children are the property of their parents, and give them the respect a servant gives his master. Or else.

**Wives**

Wives are the property of their husbands. See previous admonition.

Some women are more independent than others, and some fear marriage. However, every woman expects to be married, and to depend on her male relatives throughout her life.

Of course, not everyone is in a hurry to get married, but marriage means being in charge of your own home.

Women who would have been drawn to convent life in the old days no longer have that option, and must either marry or be a burden to their families.

**Widows**

Widows can own property and run their own businesses.

A widow is entitled to 1/3 of her husband's estates (after the bills are paid), if he has heirs. All of it if he does not. This "widow's third" is separate from and in addition to her jointure. It is still considered a good idea to re-marry to protect one's interests, however, and the interests of minor children.

Since there are tedious problems to do with whether a woman's word or signature is legally binding, she really must have a husband.

If she doesn't, her friends will worry about her being taken advantage of by sharp servants. This worry increases if she wants to marry one of them.

**Men**

In general, every man wants to marry too, or at least acknowledges that he must.

If he is not noble, he must be married to become the legal head of a household and eligible to hold public or ecclesiastical office and other positions of civic responsibility.

When he is widowed, a man also looks to remarry, especially if he has children. The traditional waiting period is called a *month's mind*. To marry again after a month is not considered hasty.

Divorce is actually more difficult to obtain in the protestant regime than in the Catholic, even with cause. Since you can't apply to the Pope anymore, you have to get an Act of Parliament! That's a lot more people to buy.

**Sources**  
Cressy: *Birth, Marriage, and Death*  
Duffy: *Voices of Morebath*  
Pearson: *Elizabethans at Home*