

Proposals of Marriage in Shakespeare's Plays: A Tabulation

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A lot of couples get married in Shakespeare's plays.¹ Most of these couples are in love. And often there is an explicit proposal, either occurring on stage or described on stage. This is a list of the marriages and proposals in Shakespeare, with some discussion.

Terminology

Being a mathematician, let me start by defining some terminology.

I will use the word "*love*" to mean any kind of personal romantic feeling or sexual desire, whether noble or base, whether by a hero or a villain. Romeo and Juliet are in love; Beatrice and Benedick are in love (*Much Ado*); Goneril is in love with Edmund (*Lear*); Cloten is in love with Imogen (*Cymbeline*). Doing otherwise would require making difficult distinctions, and I'm making enough of those as it is.

The emotions of a participant entering into a marriage fall into one of three categories. The participant may be *in love* with the partner. The participant may be *unwilling*; in that case, the marriage is *imposed* on him or her. Or the participant may be *unloving*; this includes both cases where they want to get married for ulterior motives, and where they are simply accepting it as tolerable.

A marriage where both participants are in love with the other is a *love marriage*. One where both are unloving is a *marriage of convenience*, or, if they are both royal or potentates, a *political marriage*.

An *arranged marriage* is one that is arranged by third parties. e.g. Henry VI and Margaret of Anjou (*Henry VI, P.1*).

A *proper proposal* is one that follows the form one would expect from in a nineteenth century novel: Either both participants are in love, they tell each other so, and they agree to marry, or one participant is in love with the other, says so, and offers marriage. Either the declaration of love or the discussion of marriage may be left implicit; it still counts if the intent is clear. For instance, in *Much Ado*. Benedick and Beatrice say that they love each other but they do not actually discuss getting married. In *Midsummer Night's Dream* Lysander asks Hermia to elope with him, but he does not actually say, in that speech, that he loves her. But there is no doubt about the feelings or intentions in either of these scenes. Occasionally proposals are carried out by letter; that also counts.

A proposal is *unloving* if the suitor is not actually in love with the person he is proposing to.

The acceptance of a proposal by its recipient is *warm* if they are in love with the suitor and *cold* if they are not. A warm acceptance does not always involve admitting that one is in love, or indeed saying anything at all, as long as the accepter's feeling is clear. (e.g. Hero in *Much Ado*). Alternatively the decision on a proposal may be *postponed* (the noblewomen in *Love's Labor's Lost*) or the proposal may be *rejected*.

I am not including cases where a man propositions a woman for extra-marital sex e.g. Angelo and Isabella (*Measure for Measure*).

¹I follow the *Cambridge Complete Shakespeare* in my selection of the canon. For the texts, I have generally but not always used the texts at shakespeare.mit.edu.

The Comedies

The comedies get off to a rocky start: *The Comedy of Errors* has no romance, and some of romances in *The Taming of the Shrew* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona* are distasteful. After that, it's pretty smooth sailing until *All's Well that Ends Well* and *Measure for Measure*, when things start to go off-kilter again.

The Comedy of Errors

Nothing to report.

The Taming of the Shrew

There are three marriages in *The Taming of the Shrew*: Katharina with Petruchio, Bianca with Lucentio, and the unnamed widow with Hortensio.

Petruchio is unloving — he is marrying for money — and Kate is unwilling: “I must, forsooth, be forced // to give my hand opposed against my heart.”

Hortensio seems to be unloving, but the widow is in love with him, at least as he tells it.

Lucentio's marriage with Bianca is a love marriage.

Petruchio's proposal to Kate consists of her insulting him, and him deflecting the insults and urging his case, and finally just insisting.

PETRUCHIO

Good morrow, Kate; for that's your name, I hear.

KATHARINA

Well have you heard, but something hard of hearing:
They call me Katharina that do talk of me.

PETRUCHIO

You lie, in faith; for you are call'd plain Kate,
And bonny Kate and sometimes Kate the curst;
But Kate, the prettiest Kate in Christendom
Kate of Kate Hall, my super-dainty Kate,
For dainties are all Kates, and therefore, Kate,
Take this of me, Kate of my consolation;
Hearing thy mildness praised in every town,
Thy virtues spoke of, and thy beauty sounded,
Yet not so deeply as to thee belongs,
Myself am moved to woo thee for my wife.

KATHARINA

Moved! in good time: let him that moved you hither
Remove you hence:

...

PETRUCHIO

...setting all this chat aside,
Thus in plain terms: your father hath consented
That you shall be my wife; your dowry 'greed on;

And, Will you, nill you, I will marry you.
Now, Kate, I am a husband for your turn;
For, by this light, whereby I see thy beauty,
Thy beauty, that doth make me like thee well,
Thou must be married to no man but me;
For I am he am born to tame you Kate,
And bring you from a wild Kate to a Kate
Conformable as other household Kates.
Here comes your father: never make denial;
I must and will have Katharina to my wife.

However, he does pretend to Katharina's father that he and Katharina are in love, and the father, being very interested in having her married off, does not challenge that description.

Hortensio proposes to Bianca in a letter which is a parody of musical instruction; she rejects it.

Lucentio and Bianca have a proper proposal:

LUCENTIO
Now mistress, profit you in what you read?
BIANCA
What, master read you? First resolve me that.
LUCENTIO
I read that I profess, the Art of Love.
BIANCA
And may you prove, sir, master of your art.
LUCENTIO
While you, sweet dear, prove mistress of my heart.
[*They stand aside*]

The play has some funny scenes, if one can stand them, but there is no getting around the fact that in *The Taming of the Shrew* Shakespeare is endorsing a marriage in which the husband is marrying for money; the wife is forced into it; and the husband "tames" his wife by systematic physical and mental abuse. Moreover, Shakespeare portrays this as superior to the love marriage of Lucentio and Bianca. Feh.

Two Gentlemen of Verona

There are two marriages in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*: Silvia with Valentine and Julia with Proteus. Proteus' father and Valentine's father are opposed to the marriages.

Proteus proposes by letter in act 1 scene 2; Julia accepts by letter in act 1 scene 3. Neither letter is quoted, except for scattered phrases. This is a proper proposal. In Act 2 scene 2 they pledge their love and exchange rings.

PROTEUS
When possibly I can, I will return.
JULIA
If you turn not, you will return the sooner.
Keep this remembrance for Julia's sake. [*Gives him a ring*]

PROTEUS

Why then, we'll make exchange. Here, take you this.

JULIA

And seal the bargain with a holy kiss.

PROTEUS Here is my hand for my true constancy.

Valentine's proposal to Silvia occurs off-stage.

After getting engaged to Julia, Proteus falls in love with Silvia, betrays both his fiancée Julia and his friend Valentine, pursues Silvia, and finally gets so carried away with his desire that finally in Act 5 scene 4, he threatens to rape Silvia. But then, when he is stopped in that by Valentine and Julia, he turns on a dime. In a short but remarkably disgusting speech, he forgives himself his own little *faux-pas* as "Boys will be boys" — otherwise, he's pretty much perfect, if he says so himself — and, in a weird phrase that seems entirely insulting and depersonalizing to both women, he consoles himself for the need to give up Silvia and go back to Julia with the thought that they're largely interchangeable anyway.

PROTEUS

O heaven were man

But constant, he were perfect! That one error

Fills him with faults, makes him run through all th' sins

Inconstancy falls off ere it begins

What is to Silvia's face, but I may spy

More fresh to Julia's with a constant eye?

This whole thing is awful; a unusual degree of moral slovenliness as well as slipshod plotting on Shakespeare's part. I can't guess what Shakespeare thought about this or wanted his audience to think, but I refuse to accept that a man who has been behaving the way Proteus has and who could speak that speech is in love with Julia in even the broadest sense of the word. It seems quite clear that after being married to Julia for a couple of years, Proteus will again find that alas man is inconstant gosh darn it, and will either have affairs with or rape such women as are in convenient reach. Poor Julia is certainly in love with him, though, and somehow finds the resolution acceptable, or at least tolerable.

Valentine's marriage to Silvia is a love marriage.

A Midsummer Night's Dream

There are three marriages in *Midsummer Night's Dream*: Hermia and Lysander, Helena and Demetrius, Hippolyta and Theseus. The first two are love marriages (albeit requiring a love potion for Demetrius). Hermia's marriage to Lysander is against the opposition of her father, who is backed by Theseus.

Theseus says of his marriage to Hippolyta:

THESEUS

Hippolyta, I woo'd thee with my sword,

And won thy love, doing thee injuries;

But I will wed thee in another key,

With pomp, with triumph and with revelling

Theseus and Hippolyta do say that they are now in love with one another, but I'm counting this as a political marriage on Theseus' part and a forced one on Hippolyta's.

Lysander and Hermia are already (in their view) engaged before the action of the play, but the plan they make to elope is essentially a proposal and a warm acceptance:

LYSANDER

. . . therefore, hear me, Hermia.
I have a widow aunt, a dowager
Of great revenue, and she hath no child:
From Athens is her house remote seven leagues;
And she respects me as her only son.
There, gentle Hermia, may I marry thee;
And to that place the sharp Athenian law
Cannot pursue us. If thou lovest me then,
Steal forth thy father's house to-morrow night;
And in the wood, a league without the town,
Where I did meet thee once with Helena,
To do observance to a morn of May,
There will I stay for thee.

HERMIA

My good Lysander!
I swear to thee, by Cupid's strongest bow,
By his best arrow with the golden head,
By the simplicity of Venus' doves,
By that which knitteth souls and prospers loves,
And by that fire which burn'd the Carthage queen,
When the false Trojan under sail was seen,
By all the vows that ever men have broke,
In number more than ever women spoke,
In that same place thou hast appointed me,
To-morrow truly will I meet with thee.

Demetrius proposes (more or less) to Helena in a speech addressed to Theseus:

DEMETRIUS

And all the faith, the virtue of my heart,
The object and the pleasure of mine eye,
Is only Helena. To her, my lord,
Was I betroth'd ere I saw Hermia:
But, like in sickness, did I loathe this food;
But, as in health, come to my natural taste,
Now I do wish it, love it, long for it,
And will for evermore be true to it.

Helena does not answer but she has already amply proved that she is in love with Demetrius.

Love's Labor's Lost

Love's Labor's Lost involves five courtships: The King of Navarre courts the Princess of France;

Berowne courts Rosaline; Longueville courts Maria; Dumaine courts Katharine; and Don Adriano courts Jaquenetta (in fact, gets her pregnant). The noblewomen all defer their acceptance of the proposals for a year, to make sure that their suitors are serious and willing to wait. Don Adriano will marry Jaquenetta, probably sooner.

Large parts of Acts 2-5 consist of the men courting the women — by letter, in disguise as Russians, and directly. Here's Ferdinand's letter:

FERDINAND

[*Reads*] So sweet a kiss the golden sun gives not
To those fresh morning drops upon the rose,
As thy eye-beams, when their fresh rays have smote
The night of dew that on my cheeks down flows:
Nor shines the silver moon one half so bright
Through the transparent bosom of the deep,
As doth thy face through tears of mine give light;
Thou shinest in every tear that I do weep:
No drop but as a coach doth carry thee;
So ridest thou triumphing in my woe.
Do but behold the tears that swell in me,
And they thy glory through my grief will show:
But do not love thyself; then thou wilt keep
My tears for glasses, and still make me weep.
O queen of queens! how far dost thou excel,
No thought can think, nor tongue of mortal tell.

The Merchant of Venice

Three marriages are contracted in *The Merchant of Venice*. Portia and Bassanio; Nerissa and Gratiano; and Jessica and Lorenzo. All three are marriages of love. Jessica's is against the strong opposition of her father.

Portia's marriage is determined by the fairy-tale test set up by her late father, of choosing the lead casket rather than the gold or silver one. So her suitors cannot exactly propose to her, as she has no choice in either direction. The Prince of Morocco praises Portia extravagantly

PRINCE OF MOROCCO

'Who chooseth me shall gain what many men desire.'
Why, that's the lady; all the world desires her;
From the four corners of the earth they come,
To kiss this shrine, this mortal-breathing saint:
The Hyrcanian deserts and the vasty wilds
Of wide Arabia are as thoroughfares now
For princes to come view fair Portia:
The watery kingdom, whose ambitious head
Spits in the face of heaven, is no bar
To stop the foreign spirits, but they come,
As o'er a brook, to see fair Portia.

The Prince of Aragon says nothing at all about the woman he is courting.

Before Bassanio chooses, Portia says that she wishes she could tell him the solution; that is, she wants to marry him. Bassanio flirts with her, but does not say that he loves her until after he has made the right choice. Portia gives Bassanio an engagement ring.

Portia's suitors, incidentally, have to swear that, if they choose the wrong casket, then they will never woo another woman (not, it may be noted, that they will never *marry* another woman — in *The Merchant of Venice* of all places, this kind of legalistic hair-splitting may well matter.)

The proposal of Gratiano to Nerissa is off-stage, but from his description is clearly a proper proposal with an acceptance that is warm, though conditional on Antonio succeeding in choosing the right casket:

GRATIANO [*to Antonio*]:
Your fortune stood upon the casket there,
And so did mine too, as the matter falls;
For wooing here until I sweat again,
And sweating until my very roof was dry
With oaths of love, at last, if promise last,
I got a promise of this fair one here
To have her love, provided that your fortune
Achieved her mistress.

Jessica and Lorenzo have arranged for their elopement before their first appearance on stage, and there is no description of the proposal.

As You Like It

As You Like It is largely about courtship, and it concludes with four weddings: Rosalind and Orlando, Celia and Oliver, Silvius and Phebe, and Touchstone and Audrey. The first two are certainly love matches. Silvius is certainly in love; Phebe may just be fulfilling the vow that Rosalind tricked her into. On the other hand, she does finally say to Silvius, “I will not eat my word, now thou art mine; // Thy faith my fancy to thee doth combine.”

Touchstone is also a little dubious; in act 3 scene 4 he is thinking of having an invalid marriage so that he can leave Audrey when he tires of her after a couple of months; and Jaques predicts that they will have only a couple months of happy marriage. On the other hand, Hymen incarnate seems to be content with all four marriages. At the end of the day, I think that Shakespeare intends us to view this as four love marriages.

A large fraction of the play consists of courtship, but there is actually no on-stage proper proposal.

The closest for Orlando is this:

ROSALIND: You say you will have her, when I bring her?
ORLANDO: That would I do, were I of all kingdoms king.

The engagement of Celia and Oliver takes place off stage. Oliver speaks of “my sudden wooing, . . . her sudden consenting”. Rosalind's account is vivid and a little fanciful.

ROSALIND
[Y]our brother and my sister no sooner met but they looked, no sooner looked but they

loved, no sooner loved but they sighed, no sooner sighed but they asked one another the reason, no sooner knew the reason but they sought the remedy; and in these degrees have they made a pair of stairs to marriage which they will climb incontinent, or else be incontinent before marriage: they are in the very wrath of love and they will together; clubs cannot part them.

Presumably before the action Silvius has proposed, more than once, to Phebe and been rejected. During the play itself, he is too discouraged to propose again, and then, when the tables are turned, it is unnecessary, since Phebe has already promised to marry him.

Touchstone says a number of times that he *will* marry Audrey, but never, during the play, actually *asks* Audrey to marry him.

Much Ado About Nothing

Much Ado About Nothing ends with two love marriages: Hero to Claudio, and Beatrice to Benedick.

Don Pedro proposes to Beatrice; if he is serious, then this is a proper proposal, but he may just be flirting. In any case, she rejects him, gently.

BEATRICE

I may sit in a corner and cry heigh-ho for a husband!

DON PEDRO

Lady Beatrice, I will get you one.

BEATRICE

I would rather have one of your father's getting. Hath your grace ne'er a brother like you? Your father got excellent husbands, if a maid could come by them.

DON PEDRO

Will you have me, lady?

BEATRICE

No, my lord, unless I might have another for working-days: your grace is too costly to wear every day.

Claudio is too shy to propose directly to Hero, so he asks Don Pedro to do it for him. At a masked ball Don Pedro in disguise as Claudio proposes to Hero and is accepted. The final direct proposal between Claudio and Hero is thus:

DON PEDRO

Here, Claudio, I have wooed in thy name, and fair Hero is won: I have broke with her father, and his good will obtained: name the day of marriage, and God give thee joy!

LEONATO

Count, take of me my daughter, and with her my fortunes: his grace hath made the match, and an grace say Amen to it.

BEATRICE

Speak, count, 'tis your cue.

CLAUDIO

Silence is the perfectest herald of joy: I were but little happy, if I could say how much. Lady, as you are mine, I am yours: I give away myself for you and dote upon the exchange.

BEATRICE

Speak, cousin; or, if you cannot, stop his mouth with a kiss, and let not him speak neither.

The proposal between Benedick and Beatrice, after they have been tricked into it by their friends, I think, my favorite in Shakespeare after Romeo and Juliet, which is in a class by itself.

BENEDICK

I do love nothing in the world so well as you: is not that strange?

BEATRICE

As strange as the thing I know not. It were as possible for me to say I loved nothing so well as you: but believe me not; and yet I lie not; I confess nothing, nor I deny nothing. I am sorry for my cousin.

BENEDICK

By my sword, Beatrice, thou lovest me.

BEATRICE

Do not swear, and eat it.

BENEDICK

I will swear by it that you love me; and I will make him eat it that says I love not you.

BEATRICE

Will you not eat your word?

BENEDICK

With no sauce that can be devised to it. I protest I love thee.

BEATRICE

Why, then, God forgive me!

BENEDICK

What offence, sweet Beatrice?

BEATRICE

You have stayed me in a happy hour: I was about to protest I loved you.

BENEDICK

And do it with all thy heart.

BEATRICE

I love you with so much of my heart that none is left to protest.

Twelfth Night

Twelfth Night has three marriages: Viola to Duke Orsino, Olivia to Sebastian, and Maria to Sir Andrew Aguecheek. All three are presumably love marriages.

The Duke sends Viola to deliver his proposal to Olivia. Olivia rejects it, because she “cannot love him.”

VIOLA

My lord and master loves you: O, such love
Could be but recompensed, though you were crown'd
The nonpareil of beauty!

OLIVIA

How does he love me?

VIOLA

With adorations, fertile tears,
With groans that thunder love, with sighs of fire.

OLIVIA

Your lord does know my mind; I cannot love him:
Yet I suppose him virtuous, know him noble,
Of great estate, of fresh and stainless youth;
In voices well divulged, free, learn'd and valiant;
And in dimension and the shape of nature
A gracious person: but yet I cannot love him;
He might have took his answer long ago.

Olivia proposes to Viola, disguised as Cesario, or at least she makes an explicit declaration of love that could easily have turned into an engagement, if things had been otherwise (for all that Olivia says, "I will not have you.") It is quite beautiful.

OLIVIA

O, by your leave, I pray you,
I bade you never speak again of him [*Duke Orsino*]
But, would you undertake another suit,
I had rather hear you to solicit that
Than music from the spheres.

VIOLA

Dear lady, —

OLIVIA

Give me leave, beseech you. I did send,
After the last enchantment you did here,
A ring in chase of you: so did I abuse
Myself, my servant and, I fear me, you:
Under your hard construction must I sit,
To force that on you, in a shameful cunning,
Which you knew none of yours: what might you think?
Have you not set mine honour at the stake
And baited it with all the unmuzzled thoughts
That tyrannous heart can think? To one of your receiving
Enough is shown: a cypress, not a bosom,
Hideth my heart. So, let me hear you speak.

VIOLA

I pity you.

...

The clock strikes.

OLIVIA

The clock upbraids me with the waste of time.
Be not afraid, good youth, I will not have you:

And yet, when wit and youth is come to harvest,
Your wife is like to reap a proper man:

...

OLIVIA

Oh, what a deal of scorn looks beautiful
In the contempt and anger of his lip!
A murderous guilt shows not itself more soon
Than love that would seem hid: love's night is noon.
Cesario, by the roses of the spring,
By maidhood, honour, truth and every thing,
I love thee so, that, maugre all thy pride,
Nor wit nor reason can my passion hide.
Do not extort thy reasons from this clause,
For that I woo, thou therefore hast no cause,
But rather reason thus with reason fetter,
Love sought is good, but given unsought better.

VIOLA

By innocence I swear, and by my youth
I have one heart, one bosom and one truth,
And that no woman has; nor never none
Shall mistress be of it, save I alone.
And so adieu, good madam: never more
Will I my master's tears to you deplore.

OLIVIA

Yet come again; for thou perhaps mayst move
That heart, which now abhors, to like his love.

Olivia proposes to Sebastian. He is understandably confused about what is going on, and even worries that Olivia may be crazy, but he is perfectly happy to marry the beautiful, rich, amorous noblewoman.

OLIVIA

Blame not this haste of mine. If you mean well,
Now go with me and with this holy man
Into the chantry by: there, before him,
And underneath that consecrated roof,
Plight me the full assurance of your faith;
That my most jealous and too doubtful soul
May live at peace. He shall conceal it
Whiles you are willing it shall come to note,
What time we will our celebration keep
According to my birth. What do you say?

SEBASTIAN

I'll follow this good man, and go with you;
And, having sworn truth, ever will be true.

Duke Orsino's proposal to Viola is rather oblique.

DUKE ORSINO

Boy, thou hast said to me a thousand times
Thou never shouldst love woman like to me.

VIOLA

And all those sayings will I overwear;
And those swearings keep as true in soul
As doth that orb'd continent the fire
That severs day from night.

DUKE ORSINO

Give me thy hand;
And let me see thee in thy woman's weeds.

Later in the scene he does tell Viola that he loves her, though pretty tepidly.

DUKE ORSINO

But when in other habits you are seen,
Orsino's mistress and his fancy's queen.

Sir Toby's proposal to Maria, if there was one is not recorded. Both he and Sir Andrew Aguecheek say, in Act 2 scene 5 that they could marry her for the trick she's played on Malvolio and they both invite her to put her foot on their necks, but that is not a proposal.

The Merry Wives of Windsor

In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Anne Page is in love with Fenton, but her father wants her to marry Slender, who is not actually interested in her. Anne's mother wants her to marry Doctor Caius.

Fenton says that he originally wooed Anne for her money, but then fell in love with her:

FENTON

No, heaven so speed me in my time to come!
Albeit I will confess thy father's wealth
Was the first motive that I woo'd thee, Anne:
Yet, wooing thee, I found thee of more value
Than stamps in gold or sums in sealed bags;
And 'tis the very riches of thyself
That now I aim at.

ANNE PAGE

Gentle Master Fenton,
Yet seek my father's love; still seek it, sir:
If opportunity and humblest suit
Cannot attain it, why, then,—hark you hither!

[*They converse apart*]

Later in the same scene, Slender, a rich idiot, under pressure from his Anne's father and from his cousin Robert Shallow makes what is barely a proposal to Anne; it is hardly even necessary to bother rejecting it.

SHALLOW

Mistress Anne, my cousin loves you.

SLENDER

Ay, that I do; as well as I love any woman in Gloucestershire.

SHALLOW

He will maintain you like a gentlewoman.

SLENDER

Ay, that I will, come cut and long-tail, under the degree of a squire.

SHALLOW

He will make you a hundred and fifty pounds jointure.

ANNE PAGE

Good Master Shallow, let him woo for himself.

SHALLOW

Marry, I thank you for it; I thank you for that good comfort. She calls you, coz: I'll leave you.

ANNE PAGE

Now, Master Slender,—

SLENDER

Now, good Mistress Anne,—

ANNE PAGE

What is your will?

SLENDER

My will! 'od's heartlings, that's a pretty jest indeed! I ne'er made my will yet, I thank heaven; I am not such a sickly creature, I give heaven praise.

ANNE PAGE

I mean, Master Slender, what would you with me?

SLENDER

Truly, for mine own part, I would little or nothing with you. Your father and my uncle hath made motions: if it be my luck, so; if not, happy man be his dole! They can tell you how things go better than I can: you may ask your father; here he comes.

All's Well that End's Well

Helena, a doctor's daughter, is in love with Bertram, a nobleman, but he has no interest at all in her — whether just because of snobbery or because he just doesn't like her, or both, is not clear. She cures the king of a chronic ailment and asks for Bertram's hand in marriage as a reward, and the king accordingly forces Bertram to marry her. So this counts as a one-sided, imposed marriage with a non-standard proposal.

KING

Fair maid, send forth thine eye: this youthful parcel
Of noble bachelors stand at my bestowing,
O'er whom both sovereign power and father's voice
I have to use: thy frank election make;
Thou hast power to choose, and they none to forsake.

HELENA

[*To BERTRAM*] I dare not say I take you; but I give
Me and my service, ever whilst I live,
Into your guiding power. This is the man.

KING

Why, then, young Bertram, take her; she's thy wife.

BERTRAM

My wife, my liege! I shall beseech your highness,
In such a business give me leave to use
The help of mine own eyes.

KING

Know'st thou not, Bertram,
What she has done for me?

BERTRAM

Yes, my good lord;
But never hope to know why I should marry her.

KING

Thou know'st she has raised me from my sickly bed.

BERTRAM

But follows it, my lord, to bring me down
Must answer for your raising?

...

KING

If thou canst like this creature as a maid,
I can create the rest: virtue and she
Is her own dower; honour and wealth from me.

BERTRAM

I cannot love her, nor will strive to do't.

KING

Thou wrong'st thyself, if thou shouldst strive to choose.

HELENA

That you are well restored, my lord, I'm glad:
Let the rest go.

KING

My honour's at the stake; which to defeat,
I must produce my power.

...

Take her by the hand,
And tell her she is thine: to whom I promise
A counterpoise, if not to thy estate
A balance more replete.

BERTRAM

I take her hand.

Bertram is an unsympathetic character throughout the play; still, this scene doesn't sit well. To counterbalance it, let me quote the sweetest lines of the play (after Helena and Bertram have been married and he has told her that he is leaving for the wars immediately, without consummating the marriage.)

HELENA

Pray, sir, your pardon.

BERTRAM

Well, what would you say?

HELENA

I am not worthy of the wealth I owe,
Nor dare I say 'tis mine, and yet it is;
But, like a timorous thief, most fain would steal
What law does vouch mine own.

BERTRAM

What would you have?

HELENA

Something; and scarce so much: nothing, indeed.
I would not tell you what I would, my lord:
Faith yes;
Strangers and foes do sunder, and not kiss.

Measure for Measure

Measure for Measure ends with three marriages — Juliet to Claudio, Mariana to Angelo, and Isabella to the Duke — but not much occasion for celebration.

The marriage of Juliet and Claudio is a love marriage; the plot is set in motion by the fact that they have slept together, and Juliet has gotten pregnant, before they get married. The proposal, if any, is before the start of the play.

Prior to the action of the play, Angelo became engaged to Mariana, and then jilted her. He is forced into marriage by the Duke. This is one-sided marriage on Mariana's side and an imposed one on Angelo's.

The Duke proposes to Isabella twice in the final scene: first, in the words "Give me your hand, and say you will be mine," and then, in the last speech of the play,

DUKE OF MILAN

Dear Isabel

I have a motion much imports your good,
Whereto if you'll a willing ear incline
What's mine is your, and what is yours is mine.

The first time, she does not answer him, and the second time, the curtain falls.

This is the only indication that the Duke is in love with Isabella. There is no indication whatever that she is in love with him, and I see no reason to take that on faith. Considering the way that he has been gaslighting her in this whole scene, and considering that her initial goal was to take vows as a nun, it is altogether implausible that she is enthusiastic about it. (Added in 2024: There has been a stage tradition since 1970 of having Isabella wordlessly reject the Duke's proposal; the introduction to the Arden edition has a detailed account. Presumably, however, that is not what Shakespeare had in mind.)

The Histories

Henry VI, Part 1

Henry VI first engages himself to the daughter of the Earl of Armagnac (so entirely political a marriage that the daughter's name is not even mentioned); then the Earl of Suffolk persuades him to break that engagement and marry Margaret of Anjou instead. Both engagements are entirely arranged.

Henry's response is that he's sure either woman will be fine, and they should please stop confusing him with all these decisions. Henry VI is a Weak King.

Henry VI, Part 2

The marriage of Henry VI with Margaret of Anjou, planned in *Henry VI, Part 1* is carried out.

Henry VI, Part 3

King Edward IV marries Lady Elizabeth Grey. On his part this is a marriage of passion; the marriage brings no political advantage and his family and advisers are opposed to it. On her part, this is presumably a marriage of convenience. At the time of his marriage, the Earl of Warwick is in France trying to negotiate a marriage with Lady Bona of Savoy.

Edward first tries to bribe her into sleeping with him; when she refuses that, he proposes:

KING EDWARD IV

[Aside] Her looks do argue her replete with modesty;
Her words do show her wit incomparable;
All her perfections challenge sovereignty:
One way or other, she is for a king;
And she shall be my love, or else my queen.—
Say that King Edward take thee for his queen?

LADY GREY

'Tis better said than done, my gracious lord:
I am a subject fit to jest withal,
But far unfit to be a sovereign.

KING EDWARD IV

Sweet widow, by my state I swear to thee
I speak no more than what my soul intends;
And that is, to enjoy thee for my love.

LADY GREY

And that is more than I will yield unto:
I know I am too mean to be your queen,
And yet too good to be your concubine.

KING EDWARD IV

You cavil, widow: I did mean, my queen.

This is in the end a proper proposal on Edward's part — though, as Clarence says, he is “the bluntest wooer in Christendom” — and a cold acceptance.

Shakespeare is clearly contemptuous of Edward being governed by his lust rather than his responsibilities as king; this is the only clear-cut case where Shakespeare disapproves a marriage of love.

The historical Edward IV did indeed marry Lady Elizabeth Grey, who was a beautiful widow in the mid-level aristocracy, and it was a major scandal.

Richard the Third

The one marriage in *Richard the Third* is Richard's marriage to Lady Anne. Richard is not at all in love with her; in fact, he tells the audience that he will soon get rid of her "I'll have her; but I will not keep her long" and in fact later in the play he poisons her. However he does presumably succeed in making Anne fall in love with him; her final answer in the scene is non-committal, but she does go on to marry him.

The proposal is certainly the strangest in Shakespeare; as Richard gloats at the end "Was ever woman in this humour woo'd? // Was ever woman in this humour won?" Richard has killed her husband and her father, and he proposes to her as she is taking the body of Henry VI, whom Richard also killed, to be buried. Richard tells her that he is entirely in love with her, and that it was for love of her that he killed all her nearest and dearest. Then he offers her his sword to kill him with if she will not love him, and so on.

GLOUCESTER Thine eyes, sweet lady, have infected mine.

LADY ANNE

Would they were basilisks, to strike thee dead!

RICHARD

I would they were, that I might die at once;

For now they kill me with a living death.

Those eyes of thine from mine have drawn salt tears,

Shamed their aspect with store of childish drops:

These eyes that never shed remorseful tear,

...

My manly eyes did scorn an humble tear;

And what these sorrows could not thence exhale,

Thy beauty hath, and made them blind with weeping.

I never sued to friend nor enemy;

My tongue could never learn sweet smoothing word;

But now thy beauty is proposed my fee,

My proud heart sues, and prompts my tongue to speak.

She looks scornfully at him.

Teach not thy lips such scorn, for they were made

For kissing, lady, not for such contempt.

If thy revengeful heart cannot forgive,

Lo, here I lend thee this sharp-pointed sword;

Which if thou please to hide in this true bosom.

And let the soul forth that adareth thee,

I lay it naked to the deadly stroke,

And humbly beg the death upon my knee

He lays his breast open: she offers at it with his sword.

Nay, do not pause; for I did kill King Henry,
But 'twas thy beauty that provoked me.
Nay, now dispatch; 'twas I that stabb'd young Edward,
But 'twas thy heavenly face that set me on.

Richard gives Anne a ring.

In Act IV scene 4, Anne being dead, Richard tries to pull the same trick again; specifically to persuade Queen Elizabeth to give him her daughter Princess Elizabeth's hand in marriage. At the end, Queen Elizabeth seems to give in, and Richard again thinks he has won.

QUEEN ELIZABETH

I go. Write to me very shortly.
And you shall understand from me her mind.

KING RICHARD III

Bear her my true love's kiss; and so, farewell.

[*Exit QUEEN ELIZABETH*]

Relenting fool, and shallow, changing woman!

But in fact, Queen Elizabeth is just trying to get away from him and Richard does not marry the Princess. The power of his voice is waning, like Saruman.

King John

In *King John*, Lewis the Dauphin marries Blanch. This is purely an arranged marriage; it is actually proposed by the citizens of Angiers, to put an end to the war that threatens their city. However, Lewis makes an extravagant declaration of his love for Blanch (eliciting a sardonic aside from the Bastard, who is the voice of sturdy English common sense in this play). Blanch is frank; she agrees to the marriage because she does not hate Lewis. (It seems to me that there is an indication here that if she absolutely couldn't stand Lewis, she would have the option of refusing.)

KING JOHN

If that the Dauphin there, thy princely son,
Can in this book of beauty read 'I love,'
Her dowry shall weigh equal with a queen:
For Anjou and fair Touraine, Maine, Poitiers,
And all that we upon this side the sea,
Except this city now by us besieged,
Find liable to our crown and dignity,
Shall gild her bridal bed and make her rich
In titles, honours and promotions,
As she in beauty, education, blood,
Holds hand with any princess of the world.

KING PHILIP

What say'st thou, boy? look in the lady's face.

LEWIS

I do, my lord; and in her eye I find
A wonder, or a wondrous miracle,
The shadow of myself form'd in her eye:

Which being but the shadow of your son,
Becomes a sun and makes your son a shadow:
I do protest I never loved myself
Till now infixed I beheld myself
Drawn in the flattering table of her eye.

Whispers with BLANCH

BASTARD

Drawn in the flattering table of her eye!
Hang'd in the frowning wrinkle of her brow!
And quarter'd in her heart! he doth espy
Himself love's traitor: this is pity now,
That hang'd and drawn and quartered, there should be
In such a love so vile a lout as he.

BLANCH

My uncle's will in this respect is mine:
If he see aught in you that makes him like,
That any thing he sees, which moves his liking,
I can with ease translate it to my will;
Or if you will, to speak more properly,
I will enforce it easily to my love.
Further I will not flatter you, my lord,
That all I see in you is worthy love,
Than this; that nothing do I see in you,
Though churlish thoughts themselves should be your judge,
That I can find should merit any hate.

Of course, Lewis' declaration of love is purely *pro forma* (hence the Bastard's sarcasm.) It would be silly, almost insulting, to ask Lewis whether he would Blanch without the dowry of Anjou, Touraine and the rest of it, the way that King Lear asks Burgundy and France whether they will take Cordelia without a dowry; of course he wouldn't. But still, the proper thing is for him to declare passionately how wonderful Blanch is and how profoundly in love with her he has fallen in the minute or so since King John made his offer. The same situation occurs in *Henry V*, minus the sarcastic Bastard.

Richard the Second

Nothing to report.

Henry IV, Part 1

Nothing to report.

Henry IV, Part 2

Nothing to report.

Henry V

In *Henry V*, King Henry marries Katharine, Princess of France.

The proposal scene is quite long, mostly spoken by Henry with occasional responses from Katharine, entirely in prose except for Henry's first four lines, with some French scattered among the English. This is, of course, entirely a political marriage. It is part of the peace that has been arranged; Katharine has no choice at all about it, and Henry, probably, does not have very much choice about it. The characters know it, and the playwright knows it, and the audience knows it. But still Henry goes through the process of wooing her with expressions of passionate love, as if he were Romeo or Orlando, though his personal style is very different. Katharine, on her side, simply says that she will obey her father in marrying him.

KING HENRY V

Fair Katharine, and most fair,
Will you vouchsafe to teach a soldier terms
Such as will enter at a lady's ear
And plead his love-suit to her gentle heart?

KATHARINE

Your majesty shall mock at me; I cannot speak your English.

KING HENRY V

O fair Katharine, if you will love me soundly with your French heart, I will be glad to hear you confess it brokenly with your English tongue. Do you like me, Kate?

KATHARINE

Pardonnez-moi, I cannot tell what is 'like me.'

KING HENRY V

An angel is like you, Kate, and you are like an angel.

...

KING HENRY V

If thou canst love a fellow of this temper, Kate, whose face is not worth sun-burning, that never looks in his glass for love of any thing he sees there, let thine eye be thy cook. I speak to thee plain soldier: If thou canst love me for this, take me: if not, to say to thee that I shall die, is true; but for thy love, by the Lord, no; yet I love thee too. ...

I love thee, Kate: by which honour I dare not swear thou lovest me; yet my blood begins to flatter me that thou dost, notwithstanding the poor and untempering effect of my visage. ...

Put off your maiden blushes; avouch the thoughts of your heart with the looks of an empress; take me by the hand, and say 'Harry of England I am thine:' ...

Come, your answer in broken music; for thy voice is music and thy English broken; therefore, queen of all, Katharine, break thy mind to me in broken English; wilt thou have me?

KATHARINE

Dat is as it shall please de roi mon pere.

KING HENRY V

Nay, it will please him well, Kate it shall please him, Kate.

KATHARINE

Den it shall also content me.

KING HENRY V

Upon that I kiss your hand, and I call you my queen.

I may be falling into an anachronism (I mean as regards Shakespeare and his audience; I wouldn't try to guess what the historical Henry V would have thought) but my reading of this is that this long, elaborate proposal, though entirely insincere, and though the result is a foregone conclusion, is simply what is due to Katharine, as a bride and a princess. If she *is* going to be bid and bargained for, like beads at a bazaar, then the least her appointed husband can do is to pretend that that is not what is going on. From a more practical standpoint, it is also something of a commitment to treating her properly once they are married. No such courtesy is owed to Henry, of course; Katharine, like Blanch in *King John*, can be up front about the fact that she is doing what she is required to do.

Henry VIII

In *Henry VIII* King Henry marries Anne Bullen (Boleyn). This was presumably a love marriage; whatever one thinks of Henry VIII's later marriages, they were not primarily political. The proposal is not on stage and not described.

The Tragedies

Titus Andronicus

Having sat through this appalling play once (the Julie Taymor film with Anthony Hopkins and Jessica Lange), and having some of the horrific images stuck in my memory, I very much dislike having to think about it again, but there it is.

There is one marriage: Saturninus to Tamora. This is a one-sided marriage: Saturninus is presumably in love with Tamora. Tamora would prefer to be Empress than a prisoner of war.

There are two proposals. Saturninus first proposes marrying Lavinia by announcing it to her father Titus, describing it purely as a favor to Titus. ("Mistress of my heart" does not, of course, at all mean that he is in love with Lavinia.)

SATURNINUS

And, for an onset, Titus, to advance
Thy name and honourable family,
Lavinia will I make my empress,
Rome's royal mistress, mistress of my heart,
And in the sacred Pantheon her espouse:
Tell me, Andronicus, doth this motion please thee?

Titus accepts, on his daughter's behalf. Lavinia is not consulted with and does not respond; she is engaged to Bassanius and waiting for him to rescue her, which he does a minute or two later. This counts as a rejection.

Later in the same scene, things having gone wrong with Lavinia, Saturninus proposes to Tamora and gets a cold acceptance.

SATURNINUS

And therefore, lovely Tamora, queen of Goths,
That like the stately Phoebe 'mongst her nymphs
Dost overshadow the gallant'st dames of Rome,
If thou be pleased with this my sudden choice,

Behold, I choose thee, Tamora, for my bride,
And will create thee empress of Rome,
Speak, Queen of Goths, dost thou applaud my choice?
And here I swear by all the Roman gods,
Sith priest and holy water are so near
And tapers burn so bright and every thing
In readiness for Hymenaeus stand,
I will not re-salute the streets of Rome,
Or climb my palace, till from forth this place
I lead espoused my bride along with me.

TAMORA

And here, in sight of heaven, to Rome I swear,
If Saturnine advance the Queen of Goths,
She will a handmaid be to his desires,
A loving nurse, a mother to his youth.

SATURNINUS

Ascend, fair queen, Pantheon. Lords, accompany
Your noble emperor and his lovely bride,
Sent by the heavens for Prince Saturnine,
Whose wisdom hath her fortune conquered:
There shall we consummate our spousal rites.

[How does one pronounce “gallant’st” as a two-syllable word, with the stress on the first syllable, with both a’s pronounced but the e elided? I can imagine eliding the second a and pronouncing it “GALN-tist”. I can barely imagine eliding the first a and pronouncing it “GLAN-tist”. But I don’t see how an English speaker can possibly pronounce “GALL-antst” as written. I am not going to rewatch the movie to find out.]

Enough of that.

Romeo and Juliet

Well, obviously.

There is one marriage in *Romeo and Juliet*, carried out against the opposition of both sets of parents.

The balcony scene is the *ne plus ultra* of literary marriage proposals. The lovers get around to talking about marriage about half way through.

JULIET

This bud of love, by summer’s ripening breath,
May prove a beauteous flower when next we meet.
Good night, good night! as sweet repose and rest
Come to thy heart as that within my breast!

ROMEO

O, wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied?

JULIET

What satisfaction canst thou have to-night?

ROMEO

The exchange of thy love’s faithful vow for mine.

JULIET

I gave thee mine before thou didst request it:
And yet I would it were to give again.

ROMEO

Wouldst thou withdraw it? for what purpose, love?

JULIET

But to be frank, and give it thee again.
And yet I wish but for the thing I have:
My bounty is as boundless as the sea,
My love as deep; the more I give to thee,
The more I have, for both are infinite.

Romeo's proposal to Juliet is the most beautiful proposal in Shakespeare, perhaps in literature. The proposal that Juliet should marry Paris is the ugliest. It takes place in stages. First, Paris asks the aid of Juliet's mother and father in his suit, and they promise their assistance.

PARIS

These times of woe afford no time to woo.
Madam, good night: commend me to your daughter.

LADY CAPULET

I will, and know her mind early to-morrow;
To-night she is mew'd up to her heaviness.

CAPULET

Sir Paris, I will make a desperate tender
Of my child's love: I think she will be ruled
In all respects by me; nay, more, I doubt it not.
Wife, go you to her ere you go to bed;
Acquaint her here of my son Paris' love.

In the second stage Juliet's mother and father order her to marry Paris. When Juliet refuses, Capulet becomes viciously abusive. People have put together small books of funny-sounding insults in Shakespeare, but the abuse that Capulet hurls at his disobedient daughter is violent and not at all funny: “

CAPULET

Is she not proud? doth she not count her blest,
Unworthy as she is, that we have wrought
So worthy a gentleman to be her bridegroom?

JULIET

Not proud, you have; but thankful, that you have:
Proud can I never be of what I hate;
But thankful even for hate, that is meant love.

CAPULET

How now, how now, chop-logic! What is this?
'Proud,' and 'I thank you,' and 'I thank you not;'
And yet 'not proud,' mistress minion, you,
Thank me no thankings, nor, proud me no prouds,
But fettle your fine joints 'gainst Thursday next,
To go with Paris to Saint Peter's Church,

Or I will drag thee on a hurdle thither.
Out, you green-sickness carrion! out, you baggage!
You tallow-face!

LADY CAPULET

Fie, fie! what, are you mad?

JULIET

Good father, I beseech you on my knees,
Hear me with patience but to speak a word.

CAPULET

Hang thee, young baggage! disobedient wretch!
I tell thee what: get thee to church o' Thursday,
Or never after look me in the face:
Speak not, reply not, do not answer me;
My fingers itch.

Capulet and Lady Capulet storm out. Then the nurse tells her, more gently, that she should marry Paris and count herself lucky.

In Act 4 scene 1, Paris talks to her about their forthcoming marriage; this is not exactly a proposal, since he assumes that it has all been settled. Juliet agrees to it in order to play for time, planning either to get out of it or to kill herself.

PARIS

Happily met, my lady and my wife!

JULIET

That may be, sir, when I may be a wife.

PARIS

That may be must be, love, on Thursday next.

JULIET

What must be shall be.

Julius Caesar

Nothing to report.

Hamlet

There are no proposals or weddings during the action here, but there are two romantic involvements worth considering.

Hamlet and Ophelia. The relation between Hamlet and Ophelia is one of the things that I least understand in this difficult play. I am reassured to find that it has puzzled critics who are wiser and much more knowledgeable in Shakespeare than me; e.g. there is a fine discussion in A.C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy*, available online at <http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/hamlet/hamletsloveophelia.html>

Hamlet tells Ophelia, off-stage, several or many times that he loves her, most conspicuously in the letter that Polonius reads in Act 3 "To the most celestial and my soul's idol" and so on. But I don't

think these count as proposals because, I think — I am not entirely sure — Hamlet never actually proposes marriage to Ophelia. In act 2, Ophelia tells Polonius, “My lord, he hath opportuned me with love // In honorable fashion . . . // and hath given countenance to his speech, my lord, // with almost all the holy vows of heaven.” I don’t know what this actually means, concretely, but I don’t think it means that he has proposed to her. Presumably, if Hamlet had actually proposed, then Ophelia would say so and shut up her officious brother and father. This is really rather strange; a passionate declaration of love by an eligible man to an eligible woman with no suggestion of a marriage proposal is quite outside the norm in Shakespeare.

Incidentally, no one ever says anything about Ophelia’s feelings for Hamlet. Laertes and Polonius talk *at* her at great length about Hamlet and they warn her not to get emotionally involved with him, but they never ask her to what extent she is already emotionally involved. (Of course, the answer might be inconvenient.) Polonius talks to Claudius and Gertrude at length about Hamlet’s feelings, but all he has to say about his daughter is that she is dutiful. Hamlet talks about his own feelings, but he is much too self-centered to ask or say anything about hers. So one really doesn’t know.

Another mystery: Why is Hamlet’s letter to Ophelia so inept and tasteless? He begins with a phrase that is remarkably awkward and barely grammatical: “To the celestial, and my soul’s idol, the most beautified Ophelia.” Polonius is quite right that this is an “ill phrase”. He then compliments Ophelia’s nice bosom: “In her excellent white bosom, these etc.” I can’t guess what is the force of “in” — what is in Ophelia’s bosom? Perhaps the “etc.” would make that clearer. The poem that follows, “Doubt that the stars are fire, etc.” is feeble.

Well, certainly by the standards of romantic communication in 2019, Hamlet’s letter can’t be faulted for bad taste; he did not, after all, send Ophelia a drawing of his erection. And for all I know, it was fine by the standards of 1599; maybe in 1599 a young woman would find that letter delightful, and a man who could write such a classy letter would have been the envy of the whole court. But to my ignorant ear, it doesn’t sound right, and my uninformed guess is that Shakespeare intended that it shouldn’t sound right. Lots of lovers in Shakespeare praise their beloved, often extravagantly, but as far as I can find, they don’t talk about their mistress’s “excellent white bosom” or anything similar. But I can’t guess how Shakespeare intended that it should sound, or what he had in mind.

One final thought about Hamlet’s romantic intentions. Suppose that Hamlet’s times had not been out of joint, and that Hamlet Sr. had not returned from that undiscovered bourn² to make trouble — what would Hamlet have done, by way of marriage? I can easily imagine Hamlet deciding that, as Laertes expects, the proper thing for him to do is to marry some princess, and then spending the rest of his life bemoaning the fact that the cruel duties of a king prevented him from marrying Ophelia, and subjecting the Queen to an intermittent barrage of hurtful jokes about how inferior she is to Ophelia. I can also imagine Hamlet deciding to marry Ophelia and then after a couple of years deciding that she is as much of a fool as her father and commencing a series of unsatisfying affairs with ladies of the court on the excuse that his wife doesn’t understand him, and subjecting Ophelia to an intermittent barrage of hurtful jokes about how stupid she is, and unfit to be queen, and how he should have done the responsible thing and married the Princess of Sweden. The one thing I can’t imagine is Hamlet being happy and content in any marriage or being at all pleasant to be married to. I don’t like Hamlet (the character; but the play is not one of my favorites, either.)

Claudius and Gertrude. They got married about a month prior to Act 1. I think one has to presume that this was a love match. For one thing, Hamlet certainly seems to think so, though he describes it disparagingly. For another, I don’t see that the marriage would be particularly to either of their advantage, and it must have raised some eyebrows among other people in addition to their neurotic son/nephew. Whether Claudius proposed to Gertrude before or after he murdered her husband is

²I don’t suppose I’m the first person to find it strange that Hamlet muses that no traveller returns from that undiscovered bourn, when his father has, very conspicuously, done exactly that.

famously left ambiguous.

Troilus and Cressida

Troilus and Cressida go to bed together after act 3 scene 2. It seems safe to say that this is the equivalent of a marriage, though there is no ceremony and the word is not used. It is preceded by a scene in which they declare their love for each other and vow to be faithful.

TROILUS

Even such a passion doth embrace my bosom:
My heart beats thicker than a feverous pulse;
And all my powers do their bestowing lose,
Like vassalage at unawares encountering
The eye of majesty.

...

CRESSIDA

Boldness comes to me now, and brings me heart.
Prince Troilus, I have loved you night and day
For many weary months.

TROILUS

Why was my Cressid then so hard to win?

CRESSIDA

Hard to seem won: but I was won, my lord,
With the first glance that ever—pardon me—
If I confess much, you will play the tyrant.
I love you now; but not, till now, so much
But I might master it: in faith, I lie;
My thoughts were like unbridled children, grown
Too headstrong for their mother.

Incidentally, Cressida explicitly refers to the rule that the man has to propose to the woman.

CRESSIDA

But, though I loved you well, I woo'd you not;
And yet, good faith, I wish'd myself a man,
Or that we women had men's privilege
Of speaking first

Cressida's sleeping with Diomedes the following night does not count as a marriage and his wooing of her does not count as a proposal.

Othello

Othello and Desdemona are married immediately before the start of the action, against her father's will. Othello describes their courtship.

OTHELLO

My story being done,

She gave me for my pains a world of sighs:
She swore, in faith, 'twas strange, 'twas passing strange,
'Twas pitiful, 'twas wondrous pitiful:
She wish'd she had not heard it, yet she wish'd
That heaven had made her such a man: she thank'd me,
And bade me, if I had a friend that loved her,
I should but teach him how to tell my story.
And that would woo her. Upon this hint I spake:
She loved me for the dangers I had pass'd,
And I loved her that she did pity them.

King Lear

There are two couples to consider here.

The first is the King of France and Cordelia. The King of France and Burgundy have been hanging around in Lear's court wooing Cordelia:

KING LEAR
The princes, France and Burgundy,
Great rivals in our youngest daughter's love,
Long in our court have made their amorous sojourn.

After the blow-up between Lear and Cordelia and after he disinherits her, they are asked if they are still interested. Burgundy backs out. France gives Cordelia a proper proposal:

KING OF FRANCE
Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich, being poor;
Most choice, forsaken; and most loved, despised!
Thee and thy virtues here I seize upon:
Be it lawful I take up what's cast away.
...
Bid them farewell, Cordelia, though unkind:
Thou lovest here, a better where to find.

And Cordelia answers . . . nothing at all. When it is her turn to say how much she loves her father, she, famously, answers "Nothing"; when it would be reasonable to say how much she loves her future husband, she, less famously, says nothing. Is she in love with the King of France? There's certainly no indication of it, now or later in the play; still less is there any indication that she preferred him to Burgundy before Burgundy jilted her. It is the more striking as a few hundred lines earlier she said,

CORDELIA
Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed,
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
Half my love with him, half my care and duty:
Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters,
To love my father all.

Perhaps this is deliberate dramatic irony on Shakespeare's part.

It is noteworthy that Shakespeare's clear view here — France is admirable, Burgundy is a weasel — is contrary to his usual view that kings are supposed to make politically advantageous marriages. Of course, these are not historical kings; they are fairy tale kings who can afford to spend a long time on vacation in King Lear's court, wooing Cordelia.

Edmund gets engaged to both of the evil sisters (Goneril, of course, still being married to Albany)

V.2.55 EDMUND. To both of these sisters have I sworn my love.

V.3.228 EDMUND. I was contracted to them both.

But since neither marriage comes off, and the proposals are off-stage, these do not add to the tally.

Macbeth

Nothing to report.

Timon of Athens

Nothing to report.

Antony and Cleopatra

In *Antony and Cleopatra* Antony marries Octavia. This is an arranged marriage and a purely political one. Agrippa proposes the marriage, Antony and Octavius agree to it. Octavia is not even present.

Coriolanus

Nothing to report.

The Romances

Pericles, Prince of Tyre

In *Pericles*, there are two marriages of love: Pericles with Thaisa, and Marina with Lysimachus.

Simonides finds out that Thaisa is in love with Pericles. He is actually pleased but pretends to object and accuses Pericles of bewitching Thaisa. Pericles protests that he has done nothing to court her. Thaisa, called upon, essentially proposes to Pericles; the role reversal is reasonable since she is a princess and he has been reduced to a wandering, homeless, knight.

PERICLES [*to THAISA*]

Then, as you are as virtuous as fair,
Resolve your angry father, if my tongue
Did ere solicit, or my hand subscribe
To any syllable that made love to you.

THAISA

Why, sir, say if you had,
Who takes offence at that would make me glad?

...

SIMONIDES

Therefore hear you, mistress; either frame
Your will to mine, — and you, sir, hear you,
Either be ruled by me, or I will make you —
Man and wife. Nay, come, your hands and lips must seal it too.

Lysimachus does not propose to Marina on stage and his proposal is not described. Incidentally, before her parentage is revealed, he says,

LYSIMACHUS

She's such a one, that, were I well assured
Came of a gentle kind and noble stock,
I'd wish no better choice, and think me rarely wed.

Not very romantic.

Cymbeline

In *Cymbeline*, the secret marriage of Imogen to Posthumus occurs before the action of the play, against the opposition of her father Cymbeline. Imogen gives Posthumus a ring and Posthumus gives her a bracelet.

Cloten proposes to Imogen, but she rejects him emphatically. He continues by insulting Posthumus; she stops, with insulting comparisons of him to Posthumus.

CLOTEN

Good morrow, fairest: sister, your sweet hand.

IMOGEN

Good morrow, sir. You lay out too much pains
For purchasing but trouble; the thanks I give
Is telling you that I am poor of thanks
And scarce can spare them.

CLOTEN

Still, I swear I love you.

IMOGEN

If you but said so, 'twere as deep with me:
If you swear still, your recompense is still
That I regard it not.

CLOTEN

This is no answer.

IMOGEN

But that you shall not say I yield being silent,
I would not speak.

...

CLOTEN

The south-fog rot him [*i.e. Posthumus*]

IMOGEN

He never can meet more mischance than come
To be but named of thee. His meanest garment,
That ever hath but clipp'd his body, is dearer
In my respect than all the hairs above thee,
Were they all made such men.

The Winter's Tale

In *The Winter's Tale* Florizel marries Perdita, a love marriage, initially opposed by Polixenes because Perdita is thought to be a shepherdess. Florizel and Perdita are already engaged before they appear on stage in act 3 scene 4:

FLORIZEL

Or I'll be thine, my fair,
Or not my father's. For I cannot be
Mine own, nor any thing to any, if
I be not thine. To this I am most constant,
Though destiny say no. Be merry, gentle;
Strangle such thoughts as these with any thing
That you behold the while. Your guests are coming:
Lift up your countenance, as it were the day
Of celebration of that nuptial which
We two have sworn shall come.

The Tempest

In *The Tempest* there is the love marriage of Ferdinand and Miranda. Ferdinand proposes within a few minutes of their meeting. Miranda says she is in love with him, but Prospero pretends to oppose the marriage, so she does not actually accept til later.

MIRANDA

I might call him
A thing divine, for nothing natural
I ever saw so noble.

FERDINAND

O, if a virgin,
And your affection not gone forth, I'll make you
The queen of Naples.

In act 3 scene 1 they make it definite, while Ferdinand takes a break from hauling wood.

MIRANDA

I am your wife, if you will marry me;
If not, I'll die your maid: to be your fellow

You may deny me; but I'll be your servant,
Whether you will or no.

FERDINAND

My mistress, dearest;
And I thus humble ever.

MIRANDA

My husband, then?

FERDINAND

Ay, with a heart as willing
As bondage e'er of freedom: here's my hand.

MIRANDA

And mine, with my heart in't; and now farewell
Till half an hour hence.

Tally

By my count:

There are 43 marriages, either during the play or immediately before or after. 28 are between a pair of lovers. 7 involve one loving and one unloving partner. 4 are purely political marriages between two unloving partners. There are 2 where the woman is loving and the man is forced into the marriage. There are 2 where the man is unloving and the woman is forced into it.

In 9, the marriage is carried out against the opposition of the parents or authorities.

There are 38 proposals. 30 of these are proper proposals; of these 17 are warmly accepted, 5 are coldly accepted; 4 are postponed; 4 are rejected. 7 are proposals from men who are not in love with the woman they are proposing to; of these 1 has a warm acceptance, 3 have a cold acceptance, in 1 the woman is forced into the marriage, and 2 are rejected.

There are four cases where the woman proposes to the man (or, in the case of Olivia to Cesario/Viola, a woman proposes to someone she believes is a man) and three where the two partners play a fairly equal role; the remaining 28 are clearly proposals by the man to the woman.

Obviously there are borderline cases here that could be argued, but I think the general picture here is right.

Marriages	Total	Loving loving	Loving unloving	Loving forced	Political	Unloving forced
<i>Shrew</i>	3	1	1			1
<i>Verona</i>	2	1	1			
<i>Dream</i>	3	2				1
<i>LLL</i>	1	1				
<i>Venice</i>	3	3				
<i>As You Like It</i>	4	4				
<i>Much Ado</i>	2	2				
<i>12th Night</i>	3	3				
<i>Merry Wives</i>	1	1				
<i>All's Well</i>	1			1		
<i>Measure</i>	3	1	1	1		
<i>Henry6.1</i>	1				1	
<i>Henry6.3</i>	1		1			
<i>Richard3</i>	1		1			
<i>John</i>	1				1	
<i>Henry5</i>	1				1	
<i>Henry8</i>	1	1				
<i>Titus</i>	1		1			
<i>R&J</i>	1	1				
<i>T&C</i>	1	1				
<i>Othello</i>	1	1				
<i>Lear</i>	1		1			
<i>A&C</i>	1				1	
<i>Pericles</i>	2	2				
<i>Cymbeline</i>	1	1				
<i>Winter</i>	1	1				
<i>Tempest</i>	1	1				
Total	43	28	7	2	4	2

Proposals	Total	Proper warm	Proper cold	Proper postpone	Proper reject	Unloving
<i>Shrew</i>	3	1			1	1
<i>Verona</i>	1	1				
<i>Dream</i>	2	2				
<i>LLL</i>	4			4		
<i>Venice</i>	1 (off)					
<i>As You Like It</i>	2 (1 off)	2				
<i>Much Ado</i>	2	2				
<i>12th Night</i>	4	2 ^w			2 ^w	
<i>Merry Wives</i>	2	1				1
<i>All's Well</i>	1		1 ^w			
<i>Measure</i>	1		1			
<i>Henry6.3</i>	1		1			
<i>Richard3</i>	2					2
<i>John</i>	1					1
<i>Henry5</i>	1					1
<i>Titus</i>	2		1			1
<i>R&J</i>	2	1 ^q			1	
<i>T&C</i>	1	1				
<i>Othello</i>	1 (off)	1 ^q				
<i>Lear</i>	1		1			
<i>Pericles</i>	1	1 ^w				
<i>Cymbeline</i>	1				1	
<i>Winter</i>	1	1				
<i>Tempest</i>	1	1 ^q				
Total	38	17	5	4	5	7

^w The proposals of Olivia in *Twelfth Night* (both), Helena in *All's Well that Ends Well* and of Thaisa in *Pericles* are initiated by the woman.

^q The proposals in *Romeo and Juliet*, *Othello*, and *The Tempest* are initiated by both partners more or less equally.

Discussion

Some observations, in decreasing order of confidence:

1. In the plays of Shakespeare, the norm for marriages is that two people in love arrange between themselves to marry. This, we can assume, is what Shakespeare's audience expected to see in a romantic comedy, as much as a 1950's movie audience. 28 of the 43 marriages in Shakespeare conform to that norm. In 9 more, one of the partners is in love with the other. Moreover, even when a groom is not in love with the bride, he generally makes some pretense of it: Petruchio's marriage to Kate (*Shrew*); Richard III's marriage to Anne and his proposal to Princess Elizabeth; Lewis' marriage to Blanch (*King John*); Henry V's marriage to Princess Katharine. The only marriages where really no one is even bothering to pretend that love is involved are Henry VI's marriage to Margaret of Anjou and Antony's marriage to Octavia. Usually the man spends some time wooing or courting the woman (Shakespeare uses both words many times.)
2. Historical kings, queens, and other potentates are generally an exception to (1); they are expected to make a political marriage. The marriages of Lewis and Blanch in *King John*, of Henry V and Princess Katharine; of Henry VI with Margaret of Anjou; and of Marc Antony with Octavia follow this rule.

The marriage of Edward IV to Lady Elizabeth Grey is an exception that proves the rule; it is viewed by both Edward's associates and by Shakespeare as an irresponsible dereliction of duty. Henry VIII's marriage to Anne Bullen is another exception, because it would not have been safe for Shakespeare to have objected to that.

Fictional kings and queens, on the other hand, generally can and do marry for love. Laertes expects that Hamlet will be obliged to make a political marriage, but there is no actual indication that Hamlet was planning to do that. In *Lear* the King of France marries the disinherited Cordelia. In *The Winter's Tale*, Florizel is planning to marry Perdita despite the fact that she is thought to be a shepherdess. In *Measure for Measure* the Duke of Milan marries Isabella. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Portia is courted by both the Prince of Navarre and the Prince of Morocco.

In the case of the King of Navarre's courtship of the Princess of France (*Love's Labor's Lost*), love and political advantage happily align.

3. Outside interference, by parents or other authorities, is generally viewed negatively, though there are exceptions. In *Romeo and Juliet* it is catastrophic. In *Merry Wives of Windsor*, *Midsummer's Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, *Othello*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter's Tale*, the lovers prevail against the opposition of their parents or superiors, and the play clearly favors their point of view. The trick played by Hero and the rest on Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado* and the role played by Pandarus in *Troilus and Cressida* is just getting the lovers to do what they want to do in any case.

There are three or four cases where a marriage is forced on a character against their strong opposition with Shakespeare's approval: Katharine's marriage to Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew*; Bertram's marriage to Helena in *All's Well That Ends Well*; and Angelo's marriage to Mariana in *Measure for Measure*; perhaps also Hippolyta in *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* also somewhat falls in this category; she lucks out in that the man who passes her father's posthumous test is the man she loves, but it is clearly implied that if one of the earlier suitors had chosen the right casket, she would felt obliged to marry them and make the best of it. The magical interference of Oberon and Puck in making Demetrius fall in love again with Helena in *Midsummer Night's Dream* is also a successful interference, of a different kind.

4. Generally, a woman who receives a proposal has the option to refuse it (or, like the ladies in *Love's Labor's Lost* to impose conditions), with no more justification than that she does not love the man who is proposing. The most clear-cut case is Olivia in *Twelfth Night*, who rejects Orsino's proposal just because she does not love him, without even having an alternative suitor that she prefers. There is some suggestion that a woman *ought* not to marry a man that she does not love; Cordelia (*King Lear*) says so, and it is implicit in some other places. But I wouldn't say that Shakespeare endorses that attitude very strongly or consistently; Cordelia herself, Isabella in *Measure for Measure*, perhaps Phebe in *As You Like It* marry men they don't seem to particularly love, and Portia is prepared to do that, with no sign of disapproval by Shakespeare.
5. The declaration of love *cum* proposal of marriage is definitely important in Shakespeare; there are 38 of these, some of them long and elaborate. However, I think it is fair to say that it has not yet become the marked, almost ritualized, ceremony that it becomes in the 18th and 19th centuries. Shakespeare has no particular noun or verb specifically denoting the event; he does not use "propose", "proposal", or "declaration" in this sense.³ The closest word is "vows". But it seems to me that "vows", though it seems stronger, is in fact less specific than a proposal. Hamlet has made "vows" to Ophelia, but has not, apparently, proposed, and Polonius is scornful of his vows.
6. Proposals and their acceptance are sometimes accompanied by the giving of rings, but it is not standard and the direction is not fixed. Julia and Proteus (*Two Gentlemen*) exchange rings. Portia gives Bassanio a ring (*Merchant of Venice*). Richard III gives Anne a ring. Imogen gives Posthumus a ring and Posthumus gives her a bracelet when they are forced to separate (after they have already been married) (*Cymbeline*).

Some of this, perhaps all of it, predates Shakespeare's time in literature. The late medieval romances, from the 13th century onward, often involve a romantic knight who performs heroic deeds to win the heart of his lady, whom he eventually marries. One thinks of pastorals as involving a shepherd in love with a shepherdess; but I don't know to what extent pastorals before Shakespeare's time actually involved a courtship resulting in marriage.

The plays of Plautus mostly involve a young man in love. However, the woman he loves is *always* either a slave, a captive, or a prostitute; so that is a quite different situation.

Reality

In the first version of this piece, completed in June 2019, I ended here by writing,

What I do not know, and would very much like to know, is to what extent the picture of love, marriage, and proposals painted in Shakespeare's plays corresponded to the realities of his time and place. When people got married at the turn of the 17th century in England, to what extent did it follow the form described in Shakespeare's plays; a man in love with a woman wooed her, he proposed to her, if she loved him then she accepted him and they were married, if she didn't then she rejected him? Or was this, as I have seen claimed, almost purely a literary trope, and in reality people of that time had

³The first recorded instance of "proposal" meaning "proposal of marriage" in the Oxford English Dictionary is from 1657. The first recorded instance in the O.E.D. of "declaration" with this meaning (now obsolete, though the O.E.D. does not say so) is from Richardson's *Pamela* (1740). The striking phrases "proposal in form" and "declaration in form" occurs scattered in 18th and 19th century novels ("proposal in form" is in Richardson's *Clarissa*, H.G. Wells' *Marriage*, and Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*;; "declaration in form" is in *Pride and Prejudice* (Mr Collins to Elizabeth Bennet) and *Vanity Fair* (Sir Pitt Crawley to Becky Sharp)).

arranged marriages governed by considerations of property and the woman had almost no choice in the matter? . . .

Social media, at its best, is a wonderful thing. I posted this piece on Facebook. My friend Shlomo Shraga Engelson saw it there. In reply to my post, Shlomo tagged his friend (now, I am proud to say, my friend as well) Rebecca Chung. And Rebecca directed my attention to the classic study in the field: *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England 1500-1800* by Lawrence Stone (1977). My brother Joey also sent me some relevant pages from *The World We Have Lost* by Peter Laslett. Some months later I found *Birth, Marriage and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* by David Cressy, who sharply takes issue with some of Stone's more extreme claims.

700 pages of Lawrence Stone later, I now have a much clearer idea of how all this worked in England in the early modern period. Ignoring all the variation in practice and in level of documentation across classes, region (country vs. city, but also other regional differences), profession, and even family position⁴ which Stone lays out in great detail, the short summary of Stone's complex narrative is this: Shakespeare and his contemporary authors are at the vanguard of a huge shift in family structure and practices that takes place between 1500 and 1800 in England and the English American colonies (the situation in France and Italy is significantly different, and Stone barely touches on the rest of Europe). By the second half of the eighteenth century, it is largely the case (of course these are all generalizations with many exceptions) that:

1. Marriages are made for love and arranged by the principals.
2. "Companionate" marriage in which where the spouses interact closely and affectionately becomes, certainly the ideal, and to a significant extent the reality.
3. Sexual pleasure is viewed as a central and valid purpose of marriage.
4. Relations between parents and children are close and affectionate.
5. The nuclear family is the primary setting for interpersonal interactions and the object of people's chief loyalties.

In Stone's telling, in the 16th century these attitudes barely exist. In Shakespeare's time, at the turn of the 17th century, they are starting to emerge, in some of the leisured, wealthy, educated court society. In the second half of the 17th century, they become significant; and by the second half of the 18th century, they are the norm.

Much of Stone's account has been challenged. In particular David Cressy disagrees strongly with Stone's claims that love was unimportant in marriage:⁵

What place did love have in courtship and marriage? It seems to have been fundamental. Notwithstanding the sometimes strained formality of the opening moves and the calculation of material advantages, love seems to have been a common and expected ingredient in the majority of matches. Couples grew to love each other, before or after marriage, and either persuaded themselves that they were 'in love' or worked to develop a loving relationship. Rather than being surprised to find people falling in love or continuing in love, as some historians of early modern England have indicated, we should, perhaps, be surprised that anyone should think they did not. The notion, recklessly set forth by Lawrence Stone, that early modern marriage was barren of love, has been thoroughly rejected by studies of diaries, letters, ballads, and church court cases.

⁴In the landed class, there were large, systematic, demographic differences between the first sons and the younger sons, in terms of whether they married, how old they were when they married, and who they married.

⁵See also *The Family in Early Modern England* ed. Helen Berry and Elizabeth Foyster. I am extremely grateful to my brother Joey for discussions on this point.

All the same it seems clear that in general there was a large change between 1600 and the late eighteenth century. Marriages became, in general, much more a matter arranged between the principals, and much less one arranged between the families. Financial arrangements became less elaborate and it was less likely that a marriage would hang on them. Instances where the family blocked a marriage that the principals wanted became less and instances where the family successfully forced the woman into a marriage she disliked became rare. (At no point could a family legally force a woman into a marriage if she absolutely refused, but they could bring extreme pressure.)

I have put together a small collection of actual proposals between 1600 and 1900 in another piece, *“Will You Marry Me?” Some First-hand Accounts of Marriage Proposals, 1600-1900.*