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Aspiring Heads and Stooping Shoulders: Advice for a Happy Marriage in Early Modern England

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Abstract

The Protestant Reformation in England began with Henry VIII's Great Matter in the early 1500s. Almost a century later, British society's understanding of what made a good and happy marriage had evolved alongside the broader shifts in church doctrine, and Puritan factions began to splinter from mainstream Anglican practices and teachings. Writing in 1617 from the Protestant stronghold of Oxfordshire, an influential minister named William Whately offered newlyweds and engaged couples advice regarding their duties to each other and to their community. This 'Bride-bush,' as he called it, sought to make marriage "a great Helpe" for those who "now finde it a little Hell." A close analysis of Whately's writing reveals that at its most basic level, early modern English marriage advice has much in common with advice offered today, despite its misogynist language and thoughts about the role of a wife in the household. Marriage remained a societal institution but the idea of marriage as a personal commitment, potentially including happiness with and love for one's spouse, had started to take root. Whately was an early, moderate voice amidst what would develop into a cacophony of Puritan teachings and factions, and his 'Bride-bush' pamphlet provides a glimpse into some of the practical concerns which may have plagued an everyday Englishman in the early seventeenth century.

Keywords: religious history, women's history

In 1617, a London shop near the Royal Exchange began to sell a pamphlet entitled *A Bride-Bush: or, a Wedding sermon compendiously describing the duties of married persons*, written by William Whately, a Puritan minister. Whately lived in Banbury, Oxfordshire, which developed into something of a hotbed of Puritanism as a result of Whately's preaching and his family's influence (Eales). In an effort to spread his beliefs further than the villages immediately near Oxfordshire, Whately published "A Bride-Bush" and some of his other sermons as pamphlets to be sold throughout England.

A Bride-Bush offers marriage advice to "all such as either are or shall be entred [sic] into this estate" (Whately, 1). The pamphlet's title suggests the bouquet of flowers that brides carry at their wedding, and so equates the advice within with beauty, sweet smells, and an established wedding tradition. The work could presumably serve as an 'off the rack' type sermon for any clergyman to use during a wedding ceremony, but its length and comprehensive content suggest that it would be better used as a resource for clergy attempting to help married couples each improve their happiness with the other. Married men, or men soon to be married, could also have purchased the pamphlet from the shop in London. Although the pamphlet also features a section in which Whately addresses wives directly, it seems unlikely that a woman would want to purchase it herself, or be seen purchasing it. A married man in early seventeenth-century England, especially in London, would have the social capital to deflect any criticism or scorn associated with purchasing a pamphlet full of marriage advice. In a society where a wife owed diligent obedience to her husband in all things, though, a respectable woman would not purchase something which suggested displeasure with her husband.

Whately's contemporaries knew and recognized his skill in writing and oration, and modern readers of *A Bride-bush* can easily discern this skill, as well. Whately uses evocative phrasing and imagery to illustrate the advice he gives throughout the sermon. A recurring image is the married couple as "yoke-fellows" (Whately, 2). In order to underscore his exhortation that happy marriage involves hard work and cooperation between the spouses, Whately uses the term 'yoke-fellows' to conjure an image of the couple as a pair of oxen, toiling away for years. Oxen must pull together against the yoke, and must pull in the same direction. Their work is difficult, not glamorous or comfortable, and goes on for years. If oxen fail to work together, none of the necessary work can be finished. Whately's use of the 'yoke-fellows' phrase, then, paints somewhat of a grim picture of what marriage entails.

In addition to referring to men and women as 'yoke-fellows' in marriage, Whately uses imagery of the couple as the head and shoulders of one body, which is the married couple's family and household. The early modern English husband, of course, is the head, making decisions for the rest of the body, above the rest of the body in both the metaphor and in common societal practice. Near the beginning of his advice for husbands, Whately asserts that "The Lord in his Word calls him [the husband] the head; hee must not stand lower than the shoulders; if he doe, that is a deformed family. It is a sin to come lower than God hath set one" (18-19). Whately urges the husband to utilize a level head, thriftiness, and solemnity in his dealings with his household. He writes that the "bitter man is as a franticke head, troublesome: the unthrifty man as a scald head, fulsome: the light man, the Jester, as a giddy head, ridiculous" (20). Any man who expects people to take him seriously, then, must act in a manner deserving of that regard, according to Whately.

The head also determines all actions of a body, and so does the husband have the final authority in a marriage. Although a husband therefore is responsible for everything that happens

under his roof, he should not, according to Whately, actually dictate every occurrence that does or does not take place. Whately illustrates for his reader the absurdity of the idea of a head “always actually stooping unto the foote,” suggesting that a husband micro-managing his household will cause the body to “grow crooked and ill shapen” (24). If he gives his wife the latitude and permission to manage day-to-day affairs within the household, the husband becomes free to manage the greater concerns and also makes his wife happy.

Whately drives this metaphor of the man as the head even further when he writes that the husband and wife both “must also bee good rulers at home, and ioyne in guiding the houshold: the man as God’s immediat officer, and the King in his family” (16). For Whately, a family is a kingdom in microcosm, and just as none are the king’s equal in the larger realm of England, so none can be the equal of the ruler of the smaller realm of the household. Whately ties this metaphor to the husband’s authority over his household and notes that any God-given authority must be exercised, as “what avails to keep authority, if hee use it not” (21)? A good man, he says, like a good member of the clergy, uses his authority of command “like a vesture for high dayes, to be put on, for some speciall and needfull occasions” (23). Whately had the benefit of an education from Cambridge and Oxford, and a remarkable command of scripture and language, but many of his readers did not have these luxuries. Imagining their roles in a marriage as ‘yoke-fellows’ and as the head and shoulders of a body which must be able to move and function and speak as one, despite being made of several distinct parts, would have helped many in Whately’s audience better understand some of the lofty concepts in his writings.

In this 1617 edition of *A Bride-bush*, Whately exhorts husbands to use wisdom and compassion while wielding their authority over the household. He speaks explicitly against a man resorting to corporal punishment of a wife, asking the reader “what Christian woman will carry

her selfe so, that a man of any indifferent good behaviour should neede to strike [her]" (22)? Rather than contenting himself with an admonishment for husbands not to beat their wives, Whately goes further, and suggests that a wise, Christian husband doesn't need to, as his wisdom will counsel him towards better solutions and reproofs for a wife who needs to be corrected.

The balance of Whately's advice for husbands continues in a similar vein, and asks men to be kind and Christ-like to their wives, reminding men that Christ's spouse was the Church. Christ did not find fault in his followers (the Apostles), but gently corrected them when they erred, and continued to strive towards setting the best example and giving good lessons. By "imitat[ing] that best husband," Whately writes, and following Christ's example of "not spy[ing] out all his Churches [sic] faults," husbands will live in happiness and peace with their wives (30). He continues to use practical examples of how to resolve arguments productively, drawing parallels between marriage arguments and riding obstinate horses or sailing in a storm. These situations which might arise in a man's life would help Whately's readers to connect Christian treatment of wives, and marriage in general, to their own experiences.

After spending a considerable amount of his pamphlet instructing husbands on their duties towards their 'yoke-fellows,' Whately offers some brief, if equally insightful and important, advice for wives, "giving the men leave to chew the cud awhile" (36). Men may have authority, and significant responsibility for the government and quality of their household, but when it comes to marriage, they are still oxen, striving together with their partners, chewing a cud while at liberty.

Whately's two-pronged advice for women reflects a deep misogyny: a truly happy wife must accept wholeheartedly that she is her husband's inferior, a lesser partner. She is the shoulders in Whately's body metaphor, and the burdens of the household and the family rest on her. Whately explicitly warns, "woe to these miserable aspiring shoulders, that content not themselves to take

their roome, next below the head” (36). Women who do not respect and support their husband go against the laws of nature, in Whately’s view, and thus against the laws of God.

Love is secondary to respect and obedience in the marriage arrangements Whately recommends. Since Whately’s wife-reader accepts her inferiority to her husband in all things, she must show her spouse the same respect she would expect to receive from the lesser members of their household. Whately appeals to womens’ sense of social expectation when he observes that “no woman of government will allow her children and servants to bee loud and brawling before her; and shall shee before her husband bee so herselfe” (40)? For Whately, an ideal wife obeys her husband “[i]n whatsoever thing obeying of him doth not disobey God [...]: and if not in all things, it were as good in nothing” (42). As she obeys, she sets a good example for the children and servants in the household. If the man is the head of all and above everyone else within the household, the shoulders are the next highest. Whately even states outright that the reverence she gives is the same that children and servants give; the difference, he says, “is only this, she may be more familiar, not more rude then [sic] they, as being more deare, not lesse subiect to him” (37). Whately built his idea of marital happiness on a troublingly misogynist foundation, one which completely subsumes the wife’s humanity and independence in favor of the husband’s. Where he spends more than sixteen pages detailing the husband’s duties towards a wife, wives occupy less than seven pages of his pamphlet.

As for each spouse’s responsibilities towards the marriage itself, Whately urges both parties to use a prayerful approach to all things. He writes, following Paul’s example, that “their meeting [in the marriage bed] must be sanctified,” and that doing so “will make it moderate, and keepe them from growing wearie each of other” (43). Whately hopes that “they should observe each their owne, not so much each others faylings,” and returns to the ‘yoke-fellow’ imagery when

he reminds couples to “contend therefore, not how short thy yoke-fellow comes, but not to come short thy selfe” (46-47). By seeking to be good as individuals, Whately says, they will easily succeed in a happy and prosperous marriage. He ends his pamphlet by asking each spouse to carefully examine their own actions and to pray for God’s help in living as good a Christian life as possible.

Living a good Christian life could mean a variety of things in England in 1617. Officially, the nation followed the Anglican church’s edicts for worship, and King James I had recently published his new, uniquely English, translation of the Bible. James was suspicious of the Presbyterian church in Scotland and its rule by a council of elders rather than a hierarchy of bishops. Rather than focusing on attempting to bring the Scots into line with the English church, though, as his son would do a few decades later, James attempted to dissemble and to compromise his way to a solution which would make conservative members of the Church of England happy while also acknowledging the demands of the increasingly vocal Puritan factions.

Puritan reformer sentiments such as Whately’s had not reached the frenzy they would achieve during the reign of James’s son, Charles I. The language in this pamphlet relies on stories from the Old Testament, including those of King David, Eve, and Sarah, as well as many writings by the Apostle, Paul. However, Whately’s writing still contained some controversial ideas. Subsequent editions of *A Bride-bush*, published in 1619, 1621, and 1623, notably recant the admonishment against beating one’s wife (Eales). Rather than advocating some of the more radical religious philosophies espoused by his Commonwealth-era Puritan compatriots, such as the antinomians and the Quakers, Whately looked to the Continent for support of his controversial opinions, namely that divorce and remarriage could happen for an innocent partner in the case of adultery or desertion. Jacqueline Eales, writing in the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography,

calls Whately's approach to theological debate a moderate one, and notes that his position within the church - and occasional role as the presiding official in church courts held in Banbury - helped to protect him from punitive action the church might otherwise have taken.

In many regards, Whately's *Bride-bush* serves as a document which looks forward towards a marriage institution with room for love and affection, but which still found itself tied down by ecclesiastic and societal expectations of marriage as a business contract. Most notably, many of Whately's descriptions of the household hierarchy call to mind the Great Chain of Being, a social stratification concept which had been common even before Henry VII took power in the late fifteenth century. As a king is God's deputy in England, so is a husband God's deputy in the home. Any subversion of this natural order would go against God and his laws. Whately alludes at one point to women who display "disreverent behaviour" towards their husbands, calling them "staines of woman-kinde, blemishes of their sexe," and so on (39). This description, and condemnation, of the scolding, unruly wife calls to mind the ridings and skimmingtons common in many English towns and villages. In these events, a community would publicly shame a couple for going against the expected order of things in a variety of ways. Such public shaming took the form of, variously, a mob playing rough music with pots and pans and other implements as it marched through town to a cuckold's house; a mob dragging a disgraced husband from his house into the street to beat him and scorn him or otherwise humiliate him; or a mob dragging an unruly wife from her house, fastening her into a scold's bridle, and ducking her into water or muck. Although these events primarily shamed the offenders before their community, they also offered everyday citizens and neighbors an opportunity to participate in a raucous, informal, unruly spectacle well at odds with orderly or normal life. Whately's readers would be familiar with ridings and skimmingtons, so his oblique reference to the behaviors such events denounced would reinforce his advice against

unruly and disgraceful women. While a wife could, according to the two earlier editions of Whately's pamphlet, divorce her husband if he repeatedly betrayed her (by committing adultery), she should still not resort to this type of public shaming of him, and should instead do all within her power to resolve her grievances before the private disagreement reached such a public boiling point.

Puritans in sixteenth and seventeenth century England also divided their communities into the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor. Whately encourages both spouses to "be laborious and industrious in their calling, and set themselves with diligence to doe something" (14). Each should live moderately and within their means, neither spending lavishly nor pinching pennies to excess. He notes specifically that husbands should "provide, after his ability, that her estate be competent, and that shee be not inferiour to her children," in the event of the husband's death (33). The pamphlet does not make any pronouncement, however, as to whether the widow may seek another husband, nor whether she must live solely off the allowance provided by the estate. The Church would have permitted her to remarry, if she chose, and her community might have seen her exceeding her allowance in the meantime as disobeying her husband's plan for herself and her household. Whately's silence here suggests a careful, deliberate shift in church opinion – a more conservative advisor might push for the widow to remain faithful to her husband, while a more radical writer would have counseled remarriage to secure a better potential future for herself.

As a Puritan minister in Oxfordshire in the early 1600s, William Whately had both the formal education and the societal support to profess a point of view which might have pushed gently against tradition but did not seek radical change. His advice, counseling men to use their authority wisely and to treat wives with kindness and respect, and women to obey and honor their husbands in all things, aligns with many traditional views of marriage. Modern readers, and

Whately's contemporaries, would have found broad appeal in his words. As a senior official in local church affairs, Whately could advocate for small changes without fear of serious institutional repercussions. However progressive some of his advice may seem to a modern reader in comparison to that of his peers, though, Whately still lived in and wrote and preached to a misogynist society. Women were inherently inferior to their husbands, weak, and sinful, and merited less than half as much consideration and advice as their husbands in Whately's pamphlet. The moderation and practicality which suffuse Whately's writing would have been easy for a layman in most levels of early modern English society to understand and to apply to his own life. *A Bride-bush* represents a moderate Puritan point of view, focused on practical solutions for everyday Englishmen in the seventeenth century. Whately's advice fit well in English society at the time it was written, and most of it also would not have been out of place in the later years of Elizabeth I's reign, or during the Commonwealth.

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