

*"Knights and their Ladies Fair"*  
*Comparing Courtship from the Seventeenth Century to Today*

**Honors Project**

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## ABSTRACT

### “KNIGHTS AND THEIR LADIES FAIR” COMPARING COURTSHIP FROM THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY TO TODAY

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This research will show the transformation of courtship and marriage from early seventeenth century America to the present through books, journal articles, film, letters, and interviews. By studying the transformation of courtship I intend to discuss the socialization before and after marriage and the changing roles in marriage. The first half of the information will be comprised of research taken from books, journal articles, letters, and magazines from the time period. The incorporation of interviews of women from the present will offer many insights into the changes that have taken place, especially from the 1940s into the twenty-first century. These interviews will serve as supplemental information, along with film, and will add a more personal touch to the research.

Women's history is an especially interesting topic because of the many different facets that it can be viewed from. For the most part women are excluded from history and cast to the side in supporting roles with much information concerning them and their contributions being lost or ignored.

History has been written by men and about men for too long. While it is true that the victors write history, the victors often forget who helped them attain their goal and kept watch on the home front.

Including women in history adds to historical study because we are able to broaden the perspective and engage in theory and dialogues that have a contemporary relevance to today's society. Women's changing social status can be seen through changing political, cultural, physical, and class power. For this reason I want to incorporate what I have learned in previous courses to see how courtship has evolved in response to economic, political, and social change. Including interviews from family and friends will make the project more personal and diverse because of the various backgrounds.

Before conducting any research, my idea and understanding of courtship was extremely vague. To be honest all that I had known, or thought I had known, was taken from novels or movies, of course being the astute historian that I am I knew they were not reliable sources. Some of the ideas I had formulated on my own were a good start, but courtship goes a lot deeper than compatibility. I was conditioned into thinking that marriage had always been about love and finding the person who was your other half. Movies like *The Patriot* depict a tumultuous world outside of the love shared by two young adults who vow to love each other always. Love seemed to be the most important aspect of their courtship and issues such as social and economic standing are not even broached. This is an example of the direct effect that modern culture has on views of romance throughout history. Social and economic roles are ignored and covered up by sweet nothings and promises of eternal love.

I chose the topic of courtship for precisely this reason. Although scholars have researched the topic endlessly and produced various works, there has yet to be an accurate description of what courtship was in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries or even what it is today. I researched books, journal articles, magazines, and the Internet to find information that I thought would be most useful in my study. In my search of primary sources I found articles from *Godey's Lady's Book*, newspaper clippings from Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and New York. The letters written between John and Abigail Adams were also extremely beneficial. As one of the most complete collections of eighteenth century correspondence, these letters helped convey the attitudes, desires, and

discussions that were an integral part of personal communications between two lovers.

In the end I was able to narrow down my topic in order to concentrate on why women chose the men that they did, how women expressed their thoughts about the process, and what role economics and social standing played throughout the process. With these questions in mind I set out to compare the eighteenth century to today's societal norms in courtship and love. The purpose of all engagements and marriages, whether or not it was specifically stated, was to forge beneficial social and economic contracts to all parties that were involved. In the earlier centuries love was an after thought and a bonus if it developed in an arranged marriage. However, in the twentieth century, love was the basis of most marriages, leaving economic and social standards to come second.

After the Revolution, the ideology of Republican Motherhood was created and implemented. It was assumed that women were to be chaste, pious, and that they would raise their children to be leaders of the new Republic. Men wanted to find a partner who would be able to satisfy the ideals of motherhood, would be a good hostess, and would take care of domestic work. Men also desired a match with a woman who came from a good family, as the socioeconomic class of her family would also impact his life. Women took pride in these roles as they wanted to raise the next George Washington, not a man who was too weak to think for himself or too cowardly to act upon his beliefs. After all, these were to be the men that would carry on the tradition of independence in the newly created United States.

For these reasons, women wanted to make a match with a man who had the social standing and connections that would keep them safe, fed, and clothed. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries men's social standing and status in society conveyed status to their wives and daughters as well. The status of her husband gave a woman a sense of power, respect, and authority that would not otherwise be had on her own. However, women were still not given their economic freedom, even though the country had gained its independence and advances *had* been made for women, a woman's economic status was nonexistent outside of her husband's realm. Women were excluded from careers outside of the home that would give them their own source of economic and social wealth. This lack of freedom and independence ensured that they would remain under the care of a male, who was able to go into the public sphere,

### **Courting**

Before a woman could get married, settle down, and have children, she must first find a man worthy of her love and devotion. The purpose of the game was simple: find a suitable man who you could make a respectable home with. A woman must know the rules of the game, the tricks to winning, and how long she should play for. Fortunately the rules and tricks did not change too drastically throughout the seventeenth and onset of the eighteenth century.

Courting is the broader term used to "describe socializing between unmarried men and women."<sup>1</sup> Courting was informal group dating between friends and acquaintances that did not usually lead to serious consequences.

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen K. Rothman, "Sex & Self Control: Middle Class Courtship in America, 1770-1870," *Journal of Social History* (1982): 410.

Courtship happened after courting took place and was more intimate, involving the two lovebirds solely. Courtship relied on “activities that were expected to lead to marriage.”<sup>2</sup> By this point the man had already proposed to his dear lady, or would propose very soon to prevent ruined reputations.

During my research I found it interesting that young men and women would devote a decade, or more, to finding and choosing a life partner. Even when social and economic status was a very important aspect in selecting a spouse, most couples were actively seeking truth, honesty, and love in their relationship. Couples were not dependent upon social occasions to meet others of the opposite sex. Young people would meet in church, school, village commons, friends, and kin much like the couples of today’s society.

Every young woman knew the difference between playful courting and serious courtship. To confuse the two would lead to unexpected difficulties and would put women in a situation they may not be able to break free from. Women needed to be careful that they did not lead a possible suitor on without any intention of taking the relationship to another level. The same could be said for men. When men became overtly flirty they lead young, easily influenced women on.

The beginning of courting and courtship preceded the most important event in a woman’s life, which was marriage. Women realized the importance of courting and courtship because these were building blocks that could bring about the “happiness or misery” that her life might hold depending “mainly on this

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 410.



circumstance.”<sup>3</sup> An unhappy marriage, which was “an evil to be dreaded” could easily be avoided by weeding out who was suitable for marriage during the courting process.<sup>4</sup>

“Walking out” was a “prelude to courting, a means of flirting and pairing off.”<sup>5</sup> Once couples began the task of pairing off, they would not be expected to stay with groups; privacy and quality time was an important element. Walking through neighborhoods offered protection for women without a personal chaperone. Couples would also attend dances, parties, and other events that would offer privacy and protection as well.

A couple was always welcome at a middle, or upper, class female’s home to sit in the parlor as it “was the only space considered appropriate for courting activities.”<sup>6</sup> Visiting in the parlor offered once again the safety and privacy that parents wanted for their children. Calling on the young woman “gave a girl’s parents extensive control over whom she saw and how she behaved.”<sup>7</sup> Even while parents wished to have some control and influence in their child’s affairs, it was not uncommon for family members to “go out for a walk or early to bed when a suitor came to call.”<sup>8</sup> These acts allowed couples to have more privacy without having to go out on the town themselves.

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<sup>3</sup> “Love, Courtship, and Marriage” *Godey’s Lady’s Book* (November, 1839).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex & Class in New York, 1789-1860* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 86.

<sup>6</sup> Rothman, *Sex & Self Control*, 411.

<sup>7</sup> Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, A History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005), 199.

<sup>8</sup> Rothman, *Sex and Self Control*, 411.

Another courtship practice that was favored throughout the eighteenth century was bundling. This type of bedroom courting gave females control, if only for a while. Bundling itself was the practice of an “unmarried couple spend[ing] the night together, usually in bed, without undressing.”<sup>9</sup> Bundling was practiced with parental permission and oversight. The couple would not be allowed to partake in bundling if the parents did not approve of the match. Bundling not only saved household resources, like candles and firewood, but it also allowed couples to “assess their sexual and general compatibility before entering into marriage.”<sup>10</sup> Sexual intercourse was off limits to unmarried couples however, bundling gave rise to the invention of petting. Petting would be considered “every caress known to married couples but does not include sexual intercourse.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Tokens of Affection**

Courtship did not stop with family visits, dances, parties, or walks through the neighborhood. At times, business and education kept young men away from their fair maidens. Young men needed a means to provide for any family they may wish to have. For these reasons men would take on an apprenticeship to learn a valuable trade or they would continue in their education. These absences were supplemented with public and personal love letters. Public letters were sent to family members or mutual friends of the young man’s love interest.

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<sup>9</sup> Yochi Fischer-Yinon, “The Original Bundlers: Boaz & Ruth, & Seventeenth-Century English Courtship Practices,” *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Spring, 2002), 683.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 684.

<sup>11</sup> Beth L. Bailey, *From Front Porch to Back Seat: Courtship in Twentieth Century America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 80.

Young men desired advice on how to win the young woman's heart and also desired for their close friends and family to put in a good word on their behalf. Even though parental control was weakened in courtship rituals of the eighteenth century, a young woman would not accept a proposal if her family did not deem him worthy or a sufficient provider. A woman could spend time alone with her prospective spouse to increase their familiarity with each other, yet in the end a parent's wisdom won over the heart's desires. A woman could become so infatuated with the idea of a gentleman that she could forgive possibly detrimental flaws to his personality or past actions.

Private love letters were more revealing than one might think. Men would list their flaws and state why or how they were undeserving of the female's love. Tactics like this were used to prepare their lover for the disappointing realization that they are not perfect individuals. One man said he was a "vile groveling selfish wretch--who was reckless, impatient, careless in appearance, and poorly educated."<sup>12</sup>

In a very rare occurrence, his love responded in much the same manner with her own letter addressing her flaws. While during this time most women avoided writing letters back to remain invulnerable, this courageous woman proceeded to condemn her own temper, her pride, and the fact that she had loved another before him. She also revealed her fear that the majority of men "believed most seriously that women were made to gratify their animal appetites,

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<sup>12</sup> Steven Mintz, "Courtship in Early America," *Digital History*, <http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/historyonline/uscourt.cfm>.

expressly to minister to their pleasure."<sup>13</sup> This young woman wanted to be an equal counterpart to the relationship, not just an object of pleasure.

Playing the role of a Republican mother, young women knew that they were entrusted with a great task for the remainder of their lifetime. The care of children would constantly fall onto their shoulders. To hold such a powerful and influential position women felt they were equipped to be treated as equals in their marital relationships. With such strong roles as mothers and educators it seems only reasonable.

After things started to become more serious, women would take control of courtship and keep the game going at a pace they felt comfortable with.

However, they still were not completely forward with their feelings. Women gave watch chains, needlework, and other trinkets to show that the man's efforts were not in vain and were actually welcomed. Flirtation was considered a game "as long as courtship remained a possibility,"<sup>14</sup> a young woman was to be careful to not allow things to become serious before she was ready to settle down. An article from *Godey's Lady's Book* in January 1831 told a fictional story of Sir Isaac Newton and a female friend who were "to open the business of cupid."<sup>15</sup> During the course of the tale Newton's companion believes that he is raising her hand to his lips to kiss and allows herself to succumb to his seduction. As the

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Nicole Eustace, "The Cornerstone of a Copious Work': Love & Power in Eighteenth-Century Courtship," *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 34, No.3 (Spring, 2001), 519.

<sup>15</sup> "Newton's Method of Courtship." *Godey's Lady's Book* (January, 1831).

account ends, Newton merely used the confused lady's hand to make "what he much wanted – a tobacco stopper!"<sup>16</sup>

Women exercised their power during courting and courtship to keep young men guessing and on their toes. However, this often posed a problem for some women, especially during courtship. Females who reveled in their power and took it too far risked upsetting the men they were soon to marry. A woman's power would last only so long and before she knew it she would be subjected to her husband's favors and his wrath.

### **The First Couple of Love**

The letters of John and Abigail Adams is a collection of personal love letters and correspondence known by all. In these letters Abigail expressed her desires, wishes, hopes, and dreams even going as far as to lend her opinion in politics. In return John referred to Abigail as his "Miss Adorable" or "the Great Goddess Diana." These letters are so open and heartfelt that any one person, be she scholar or layperson, can easily read the feeling and sentiment behind their words.

Abigail was unlike many women of her time, she unashamedly expressed her feelings of longing and desire to be with her beloved. Before John was inoculated with a smallpox vaccine Abigail expressed interest in comforting him, "Shall I come and see you before you go. No I won't, for I want not again, to experience what I this morning felt, when you left."<sup>17</sup> Most women would not make such declarations of longing or concern, even if they were betrothed to be

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Margaret A. Hogan and C. James Taylor, eds., *My Dearest Friend: Letters of Abigail and John Adams* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 9.

married. To show such concern or longing could show that a woman was not up to withstanding the demands the public realm had on her husband. If a young woman missed her betrothed so much after a mere week or two, how would she fare on her own after a month? However, Abigail does not disappoint as in a later letter she thanks John for a gift apologizes for him viewing the dark “spots” of her personality. She states, “I rather wish [the spots] were erased, than conceal’d from you.”<sup>18</sup> Even a woman in such a secure relationship as she is in feels the need to warn her husband to be. Nevertheless at the same time she lays all of her cards on the table asking outright for him to name her defects.

John Adams went above and beyond the simple request of defining and pointing out his bride-to-be’s flaws. Six imperfections were listed ranging from Abigail’s lack of playing card skills, to her lack of good posture, to her inability to sing, and finally her habit of crossing her legs. John claims that sitting with one’s legs crossed “ruins the figure...injures the health”<sup>19</sup> and leads to too much thinking. Abigail takes his criticisms in stride and is appreciative enough of his thoughtfulness to remind him of the fact that “a gentleman has no business to concern himself about the legs of a lady.”<sup>20</sup>

### **Parental Control**

After the Revolutionary War, parental control became more lax in relation to their daughter or son’s choice of a spouse. Parents would concern themselves with *when* a marriage would take place, not *whom* it would take place with. A concerned middle-class father would not allow his daughter to marry a

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 12.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 21.

man who had yet to fulfill his apprenticeship or further education. Women still held perilous statuses in social and economic life as they relied upon their fathers or their husbands. It would be unacceptable for a young woman of good standing to marry a man who could barely support himself and did not own his own home.

While parents may not have actively participated in their child's courtship, children would seek their advice and ask for their blessing. After the Civil War women sought advice and direction from their mothers in all matters of the heart. The decrease in family size allowed mothers to give more time and attention to individual children rather than dividing time among six, eight, or ten children.<sup>21</sup> Family life was growing "more emotionally expressive"<sup>22</sup> with smaller families and parents who perfected the ability to be involved and supportive, yet distant when necessary.

*Godey's Lady's Book* states explicitly that every young woman should "not fix her affections on any man, until she has consulted some experienced friend, a mother for instance."<sup>23</sup> Parents were encouraged to interfere with their child's love life for the child's sake and the parents' peace of mind. While some lovers were successful without parental involvement, there are many of those without previous guidance or "coercion of parents...ten become miserable for following

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<sup>21</sup> Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1987), 217.

<sup>22</sup> Sara M. Evans, *Born For Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 21.

<sup>23</sup> A Lady, "A Lecture on Love and Courtship by a Lady," *Godey's Lady's Book* (October, 1830).

their own fancies.”<sup>24</sup> To prevent ruined reputations and hurt feelings parents, and female relatives, needed to be involved.

A young woman would be advised against following her heart and giving into romantic notions, especially without proper knowledge of the male in question or his family. While many of these romantic notions were learned in books and talks amongst friends they were setting up young women all over for disappointment. Young women were expecting a life of “pathos, hearts, darts, and flames” with a lover who “sigh[ed] like a savior, vow[ed] she is an angel, pen sonnets”<sup>25</sup> and so on. These gentlemen were a parents’ worst nightmare as they catered to every whim of their daughters yet promised nothing of real economic or social value. A mother did not want a daughter who believed that the first male who expressed interest was madly in love with her. Thus her experience in the matter was desperately needed before a mistake was made.

Young men were guilty of leading women on when they may not have had any real intentions of marriage. Men were drawn in by a woman’s beauty and her father’s “dazzling glare of money – filthy money – is too often the loadstar that attracts them.”<sup>26</sup> In these instances we see that women were not the only ones concerned with a possible spouse’s economic status. A bride of a prominent family could mean a large inheritance to a lucky groom if he could only win her heart and the family’s blessing. Not every gentleman was willing to carve out his own inheritance in the great American frontier. It would be just as easy to woo a young daughter from old money and to weasel one’s way into the hearts,

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.



and wills, of the family. All too often parents were able to spot a man unworthy of their daughter, merely playing at love and courting to find monetary, social, or political favors.

Yet, it was not always the man who was so forthcoming in his emotions and romantic feelings. At times mothers needed to rein their daughters in from acting upon unfound declarations of love and commitment. Lessons pertaining to overly generous females are also included in *Godey's*. There have been "many an inexperienced female [that] has laid up for herself a fund of future sorrow and vexation"<sup>27</sup> all for giving tokens of her love before considering the consequences. One such consequence of leading a man on would eventually cause the scorned suitor to spread lies about his latest beloved's sexual activity, potentially ruining her image and connections.

At a time when marriage was still about social and economic contracts this would not do for any respectable woman. Mistakes like these could ruin the future not just of the young woman but of her family as well, as word spreads and other parents wonder what exactly her family stands for. These examples were used to show women of the mid-nineteenth century that they must "listen with respectful attention to the suggestions of those who may be...enabled by experience, to give her good counsel."<sup>28</sup> Failure to follow advice and proper protocol proved that a young woman was still too childish and immature to understand the harsh realities and world of marriage.

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<sup>27</sup> *Godey's* "Love, Courtship, and Marriage."

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

## Social and Economic Implications

John Calvin stated that a “woman [should] be satisfied with her state of subjugation, and not take it amiss that she is made inferior to the more distinguished sex.”<sup>29</sup> Many women made the switch to their duties as wife, mother, cook, laundress, and maid quite well. Others, who had experienced more freedom while living under their father’s roof, made the transition more slowly, or not at all. To be a spinster was to be stigmatized for life as people may assume a match with said woman would be detrimental to a man’s place in society. Yet for some women this stigma was more bearable when compared to being at a man’s beck and call for eternity. Yet, while there may be certain draws for more independent women to become a spinster, they were still under the roof of a man, whether it be their father, uncle, or brother. Without a means of self sustainment, these spinsters had to rely on allowances or raw supplies for their wellbeing. While these spinsters may have been beneficial to larger families in the care of small children or household duties, money to live off of was to be earned, not given.

Both genders looked at marriage very differently. Men were acquiring the financial and social gains that would increase their station and status in society. A woman, on the other hand, may have viewed marriage as being transferred to a permanent sitter. Marriage could be inhibitors to the freedom some upper-class women were accustomed to under their father’s supervision. “Between 1780 and 1820 many women between 14 and 27 enjoyed opportunities to attend

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<sup>29</sup> Evans, 22.

school and to earn cash income outside of their parent's home."<sup>30</sup> The thought of marriage was daunting to these women because the doors of "unlimited" opportunity would be closed forever.

Eliza Lucas said it best when she stated that it was hard to find a man that would encourage "intellectual pursuits" in the home after marriage.<sup>31</sup> Lucas was not the only woman to believe it would be difficult to find a man who appreciated her for her perceived social and economic status, her abilities and skills, and her mind. Everyone loves the entertainment and excitement that came along with courting and courtship but no one wanted to be tied down earlier than necessary. For some women in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, marriage "could be compared to a state of bondage."<sup>32</sup>

Romance, love, physical, and emotional compatibility were afterthoughts placed on the backburner where marriage was concerned. The game was dangerous for all involved. Social and economic contracts were the prize to be won at the risk of broken hearts, hurt feelings, and loveless marriages. Yet with marriage women acquired a new social status, which could be beneficial, or harmful. Women could be raised above the station they were born into. Unfortunately, at the same time if their husband suffered a defeat they would fall with them.

Even after the Revolution women were not considered their own person. A woman's role was that of Republican mother, chaining her to her family and husband indefinitely. This role took up their entire being, morning, noon, and

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<sup>30</sup> Mintz, "Courtship in Early America."

<sup>31</sup> Evans, 37.

<sup>32</sup> Eustace, 523.

night. While women were barred from public jobs, it was permitted for women to take in boarders, extra wash, to embroider, or to sell food stuffs for extra income. Yet, these small jobs were not enough to keep a woman free and independent of a male's supervision and support. The small jobs could offer a little extra spending money for a new collar or gloves, but they could not support a woman for her entire lifetime. Thus, women's reliance on men continued. In a marriage everything is shared, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and health, until death do they part.

The seemingly all-powerful male facade was not safe from the ramifications of a tumultuous courtship either. While discussing their love affairs with mutual friends and family members, men placed their emotions and personal history under intense scrutiny that under normal conditions they would not be exposed to. Men's accounts were brought to question, along with his friends, family, and past affairs he may have had. The support achieved after passing such scrutiny often benefited the young man. The allies that he might gain would prove to be lifesavers as they vouched for his moral character and compatibility with the lady in question.

"Numerous are the matches formed on the basis of convenience, but never can these couples be said to tread in the flowery paths of love."<sup>33</sup> This line from *Godey's*, taken from a lecture written by a woman, blatantly calls out the imperfection of an arranged marriage for social or economic reasons. Those who have actually found love in a socioeconomic contract should consider themselves lucky as few couples ever found love or happiness. Both men and

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<sup>33</sup> *Godey's*, Lecture on Love and Courtship.

women were proven to be greedy. While the intended groom may want the money that would come from a dowry or a deceased's estate, the bride-to-be is also considering the rank she will receive upon marriage. With rank comes money, luxuries, and respect that she may not have experienced in her father's household. While these exchanges may be all that is necessary for a "happy and loving" marriage, tides can quickly change when the husband's "capital of the column has crumbled into dust."<sup>34</sup> Hard feelings, hate, and resentment may evolve as the man's socioeconomic status has declined with his loss of money and his lady may no longer have the luxuries she once desired.

Marriage was seen as a practical arrangement that dealt with the matters of daily life and survival. In a time when contracts and beneficial pairings were still dominant, women were made into bargaining chips by their families. A good match could produce beneficial family connections, which could bring wealth or status to a family. A woman's authority rested in the home with the dairy, kitchen, hen house, and garden however a man still had the final word on transactions that may occur within this domestic realm. Females of any station in life did not have economic power outside that of their fathers or husbands.

### **The Reality of Prince Charming**

As little girls, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Little Mermaid*, and *Cinderella*, the classics, were a part most childhoods. Girls past and present dreamt that one day their prince would come and whisk them away to a fancy castle where singing with animals, reading, and daydreaming would be the norm. Walt Disney set a lot of women up for disappointment, as twentieth century

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<sup>34</sup> Godey's, Lecture on Love and Courtship.

women quickly found out the hard way that Prince Charming was not going to rescue them from an overprotective mother, the majority of the time it was not true love at first kiss, animals left more of a mess than they actually helped clean up, and the food pantry was not enchanted to replenish on its own.

The Grimm Brothers, more precisely Jacob and Wilhelm, are well known the world over for their adaptations of peasant folklore and fairy tales. Many of these fairytales have in turn been adapted over the years by Walt Disney, and others, to serve as stories conveying certain morals, attitudes, actions, and beliefs. The more light, and happy, endings were preferred over the originals in which many of the characters died at one fate or another. Much of society was fascinated with the tales of jealous stepmothers, atrocious queens, and chivalric men. However appealing these stories were to adults, they needed to be fine tuned to appeal to young children the world over for use as moral lessons.

The problem with the above-mentioned Disney Princess films is that women are portrayed in stereotypical images playing stereotypical roles. Belle, Sleeping Beauty, Ariel, and Cinderella are all young women at the peak of their teenage years, tall, slender, physically perfect. Not only are these women physically appealing, they have all the characteristics that make them princesses. They have grace, poise, compassion, a talent for singing, dancing, and cleaning, and the ability to fall madly in love with the first man their eyes fall on. While their lives seem perfect, all of these women suffer as victims of a male dominated society.

Just as all of these princesses are victims of Disney, children are victims as well since these films suggest “limitations that are imposed by sex.”<sup>35</sup> This means that from a very early age young girls are taught that to be married one must be docile and waiting patiently for their prince who will set everything right in their world. The Disney princess films offer marriage as the “fulcrum and major event.”<sup>36</sup> From what we can infer by the endings, at least Disney made these happy marriages for all parties involved. Yet, how can it be a happy marriage if it is formed on one partner’s obvious dependency and subservience to the other?

Many of these princesses, for example Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty, are passive characters. Both are ordered around by their stepfamily and fairies respectively, they are forbidden from contact with people from the outside world, especially men, and are molded into what a woman should be. Cinderella is the epitome of a housewife and mother as she must care for her stepfamily on hand and foot. Sleeping Beauty happily goes about her chore of picking wild berries and makes work seem fun for any little girl. When Sleeping Beauty does step out of line and mingles with a traveling prince, she is ultimately punished “with near death from a sharp object for doing so,”<sup>37</sup> and as a result must be reawakened by the kiss of a man.

In contrast, neither Ariel nor Belle are passive in the beginning. This sudden change in female attributes could be credited to the fact that both stories

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<sup>35</sup> Marcia R. Lieberman, “‘Some Day My Prince Will Come’: Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale,” *College English*, Vol. 34, No. 3 (Dec., 1972), 384.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 386.

<sup>37</sup> Kay Stone, “The Things Walt Disney Never Told Us,” *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 88, No. 34 (Jan.-Mar., 1975), 47.

were relatively modern, depicting a shift in the late twentieth century tide. Ariel blatantly disobeys her father by going to the surface and rescuing a human male. As a ramification her treasures are destroyed and she is placed under supervision on her father's orders. Her fins are a sign of bondage that link her to her father and all of his rules and regulations. This supervision and restriction will hopefully teach the 16-year-old to obey the rules in place and to be passive rather than argumentative. In the end Ariel is shown passively watching from her rock in the sea, pining for a love she can never have. Her father, eventually, gives Ariel the thing she wants most, to be with the man she loves on land. However, in exchange she is given legs, which cut her ties to her father and make her more like her husband.

On the other hand, Belle's resolve is only broken in the end. Her passive attitude stems from the death of her beastly prince. Yet, similar to Ariel, her show of emotions in the end gives her what she wants the most as well, her prince. These lessons in passivity show girls that all good things in life are given to you. If you work too hard for something in the end, you will lose what your heart desires the most just like Belle. Yet, even Belle had to give in to her female emotions in a last stitch effort to set things right.

These films depict docile, pretty, innocent young women that young girls are supposed to idolize and strive to be. While these fairytales do have substantial morals and lessons, such as listening to your father, never trusting a stranger, or running away, they should be watched for pure entertainment only. If society insists on a strong, independent woman of the world it is not logical to



relegate our young girls, and boys, to such stereotypical images and roles when society has changed so much.

### **Twentieth Century Love**

Courting remains an important part of modern heterosexual relationships it allows the individuals to appropriately get to know one another before taking any further action, such as sexual activity, cohabitation, and marriage. By the twentieth century “courting” would be widely accepted as referring to “going steady,” “going out together,” or “talking to someone.” Marriage is always the goal of those involved, especially for males. With increased freedom, allowed by the automobile, young lovers were able to spread their wings and experiment with greater amounts of privacy.

Over the course of my research on twentieth century courtship, seven women were interviewed extensively concerning their love lives as teenagers and marriage. The women interviewed are relatives and friends between the ages of 66 and 21. All seven have had different experiences in their lives growing up in the 50’s and 60’s, the 70’s and 80’s, and the 90’s to present. The reason behind interviewing modern women was to lend a more personal aspect to the research and to allow for more information. While there are many books, journal articles, and webpages devoted to the courtship of early America there are few sources a scholar can turn to pertaining to the twentieth century. Although the few sources are spectacular and cover numerous aspects of twentieth century courtship, there are still many that are left out or forgotten all together.

I chose to concentrate on three interviews in particular with the others' information added sparsely for comparison. The first two women are related, my mother, Lisa (b. March 8, 1968) and her mother, Rita (b. August 2, 1942). The third woman is a dear friend, Kimberly (b. January 28, 1986). Each woman has grown in her own individual way, learned lessons, suffered heartbreak, and learned when to move on with life.

The first topic that must be broached is dating. The term dating "was not used...until the 1890's"<sup>38</sup> and then it was used as working-class slang. All three of the women interviewed were in concurrence that the appropriate age set for them to date was sixteen. By sixteen the talk about menstruation, or "the curse" as Lisa refers to it, males, birth control, and sex was fresh on the mind and all three were aching to enjoy their newly granted freedom. Similar to the girls coming out in the 1920's, the "going out" scene was widely accessible and accommodating for whatever a group of friends or young couple wanted to do. The flapper women of the twenties attended cabarets, dinners, shows, and went to dance halls to meet men who would pay their way for a while. This has not changed as some women of today still expect men to pay for their meals and entertainment while out on the town. Yet, there are some women who demand equality in everything, even in paying for a dinner or a movie.

Rita fondly recalled trips to the drive in movies or soda shops with one of her many boyfriends in New York in the 1950's, while Lisa recalled Guptill's Roller Skating Rink with a back room equipped for dancing to hair bands in the 1980's in the same small town. On the other hand, Kimberly was the daughter of

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<sup>38</sup> Coontz, 199.

a Marine who ended up spending her dating years in Key West, Florida. This geographic location offered further forms of entertainment such as the beach to meet with boys at seventeen. These recollections are interesting in that not every event required a contribution to the economy. To have a good time, money did not need to be spent; a date could mean a picnic at the beach or dancing until curfew.

The three women were again all in concurrence on the correct conduct of a date. A date must above all be respectful and enjoyable and in an appropriate public setting. Going out to dinner, a movie, or a show did not signify their willingness to participate in further entertainments. The idea of group dating was prevalent in the interviews as it protected the women from male peers pressuring and held them accountable for their actions. According to Kimberly a gentleman was someone who "...opened the door for you, paid for your dinner, and let you do some of the talking." Her ideas about a male's role are very similar to those American girls in the 1920's and 30's and again go back to the idea that a man should take care of entertainment for the evening and enjoy her company.

### **A White Wedding?**

Once a couple was past the awkward stage of getting to know one another around a group of friends, single dates were commonplace. After bringing home a prospective boyfriend, the young woman's parents were aware of his parents' names, profession, and where he lived. Once the third degree questioning was complete parents were more than happy to wish their child a fun, and safe, night out. Parental approval in the twentieth century was similar to

that of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The parents of the 1900's insisted on knowing their daughter's whereabouts, who was going along, and how long they would be out. Yet as the twentieth century progressed, parents' rules became less restrictive. However, if a boy, and his family, did not make the cut the daughter may be lectured, much like the young women of earlier years to be careful of false promises and ulterior motives.

One aspect that was completely out of the question was a male staying the night, or bundling. Allowing a male to stay the night would be giving your blessing in a way for premarital sex to occur. No mother of the twentieth century wanted to raise a daughter who thought that it was all right to engage in premarital activities, especially before a discussion of birth control. The times had definitely changed allowing men and women to express themselves sexually more freely than before. Parents had remembered what it was like to be a teenager and in love, yet they would not admit this to their children. Instead, parents would rely on the telling of consequences that an unplanned pregnancy would result in for both their child and the family. Various contraceptives may have been discussed between mothers and young daughters, yet the only guaranteed method was abstinence. Thus, this method was preached above all else.

Before "the pill" became available to consumers in 1960 the only contraceptive options open for women were "diaphragms, condoms, douches, and spermicidal jellies."<sup>39</sup> While the last three contraceptives were available over

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<sup>39</sup> Elizabeth Siegel Watkins, *On the Pill: A Social History of Oral Contraceptives, 1950-1970*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 13.

the counter in any pharmacy women still needed to be fit for a diaphragm. Even if a woman was able to swallow her embarrassment long enough to be fitted by a doctor, these contraceptives were unavailable to single women. Society was not yet willing to accept the fact that young, unmarried couples were having reckless, premarital sex wherever they could find privacy.

With any number of these methods however, one ran the risk of the contraceptive failing. Of course the age old “alternatives” of “withdrawal, douching, and rhythm were [also] fallible.”<sup>40</sup> Women like Margaret Sanger advocated for an easier method of contraception that left women in charge and took the embarrassing factor out of the equation. The oral contraceptive, Enovid, was approved by the Food and Drug Administration in May of 1960 and was only obtained through prescription.<sup>41</sup> This breakthrough opened the doors for many women as many were entering into the workforce and wished to keep their family small. However, this oral contraceptive also found its way into the hands of teenagers who saw the pill as their free ticket to the world of extracurricular sex. This proved a problem to the parenting generation who had been raised to abhor such actions.

Premarital sex was seen as a way to achieve “...short term gains (dates, popularity)...’free’ kisses and sex were ‘cheap’ and men did not value them highly”<sup>42</sup> thus these “commodities” should be protected and valued. The idea of gifts and nights out paid for by sex and other acts was not merely a fad of the 1920’s and 30’s as some parents would hope to believe. Young teens were

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid, 11.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>42</sup> Bailey, 94.

acting as they perceived all teens were acting throughout the United States at the present and in the past. Everyone was assumed to be physically intimate, in one way or another, with their partner.

Adults may wish to believe that the new preoccupation with sex as an extracurricular activity was something new, but they would be kidding themselves. Kissing games like “spin the bottle,” “seven minutes in heaven,” and “truth or dare” were seen as components of group settings just as “heavy petting” and intercourse were seen as components of couples. The point is, these games are not new, while they may have different names teens of the twentieth century are not the geniuses they lead themselves to believe.

The introduction of the automobile further opened avenues for young couples to venture out further than the community in which they grew up. Group activities in the home, under parental supervision, had competition. Traveling to a different town for a fair, movie, or other forms of entertainment allowed young couples to feel as if they were grown themselves. These excursions took couples out from the watchful eyes that sat on the front porch as a couple strolled by down the street. Not only did the automobile open new forms of entertainment, it also legitimized a woman’s presence in many different establishments. Before 1900 a respectable lady could not visit “cabarets, restaurants, and movie houses without jeopardizing her reputation.”<sup>43</sup>

One thing that has changed from the late nineteenth century, to the present are the social ramifications and how sexual acts were perceived amongst society. The most significant factor in this revolution in societal thinking began in

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<sup>43</sup> Rothman, *Hands and Hearts*, 205.

the 1920's "...produced in part by new associations of boys and girls (and men and women) in coed high schools, colleges, and the workplace."<sup>44</sup> Seemingly simple acts, such as holding hands, could be misconstrued by older members of society in the early twenties. Such an act was considered indecent because only betrothed couples, in their minds, should hold hands. However, by the 1950's these views had changed drastically as Rita admits to dates where she held hands, hugged, and kissed without fear of social (or parental) reprimand. The existence of necking and petting was increasingly acknowledged as many adults admitted that for young girls to be included in certain clicks these activities were expected.

After discussing dating and courtship the next milestone was marriage. One of my questions in particular received quite a few different answers from the three women I interviewed and asked the same question of women from age twenty-one to sixty-six. I wanted to know what was expected of young girls upon reaching eighteen. I did not make a mention of school, work, marriage, love, sex or any other topic leaving the answer totally up to interpretation to see what I would get. My answers varied from graduating high school and going to college, to finding a job to become self sufficient, finding a husband to raise a family, and to the all inclusive "nothing specific" answer.

My paternal grandmother, Kathleen, stated that girls were to attend college or get married, even though few women were encouraged to attend school. This was a very interesting statement considering the great lengths women went to in order to achieve equal education laws and the statistics given

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid, 78.

in class. Given the time frame she was talking about as the mid-sixties I would suspect that more girls than usual would want to attend college. The appeal of protesting, drugs, and free love could also be found on many college campuses as part of the “college experience” or culture. With such a large group of young men and women from every walk of life and background one can only imagine the opportunities and allure that college held for young women.

These answers seem typical and compared to other answers they are. One interviewee was my 23-year-old cousin who dropped out of school at a *very* early age and became pregnant soon after. I asked her the same question and was not shocked to hear that girls were supposed to “have a boyfriend and not be a virgin.” I believe that her rationale comes from the fact that she was a middle-school drop out and was around a more mature crowd than was suitable. Yet, the fact that a young woman freely admitted that it was *expected* for a woman to attach herself to a man leads me to believe that, according to her, it is impossible to live without the support of another. Whether it is physical, emotional, or economic support I do not know.

On the other hand, Valerie, a 21-year-old college student, stated that she did not believe that, at the ripe old age of eighteen, young girls should have any relationship expectations. At eighteen most young women had their whole life ahead of them with the world at their fingertips. Anything and everything was a possibility so long as you had the desire and resources to tackle any hurdles that came before you. Valerie stated that we have our whole lives to figure out who is most compatible with us so why rush into the unknown without being fully armed



with experience and knowledge. It would be unwise to rush into battle without experience, a plan of action, or armor, why should matters of the heart be treated differently?

I noticed that the younger the woman I interviewed, the more their ideology changed from that of their mother's and grandmother's. I am positive that the answers I received can be attributed to one's morals and values, education and stability within the home, and the examples seen on a daily basis. I have to agree with Lisa's answer that there is "nothing specific" anymore that eighteen-year-olds are expected to do in society. Living in a rich suburban neighborhood, the girls there could be expected to go to school or marry a CEO, while a military child could be expected to further her education so that she can have a better life. Or in small town New York, where it seems no one ever leaves, a young girl's options may be getting a job or getting married, just as long as one is getting out of the house.

### **Parental Influence**

The power of the family, in helping to choose a possible spouse, saw a drastic decline beginning at the turn of the century. This decline has continued on all the way to the present. The chore of finding a boyfriend, and perhaps a soul mate, was left entirely up to the daughters. At one time parents felt a need to educate their children and "...had been adequate to school the young in the ways of the world."<sup>45</sup> However, the rapidly changing times proved too much for some parents to deal with as choosing the right boyfriend became many girls' first life lesson in competition, heartache, loss, betrayal, and sometimes love.

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<sup>45</sup> Bailey, 121.

Rita recalls bringing her boyfriends home and introducing them to her parents to gain approval, rather than having her parents force a “good match” onto her. The idea of flirting has remained the same over the centuries yet the tactics have changed drastically. Rita, still relying on the old-fashioned, sure proof ways, relied on her sister and girlfriends to express the interest in a certain young man that she could not put into words. Lisa was less discreet recalling times where she would walk by the classrooms of her interests and falling back onto girlfriends to do the dirty deed for her. She recollects having this plan backfire on her on numerous occasions when her girlfriends would inevitably be attracted to the same boy and “take him off the market.” Kimberly was the most brazen of all stating that she “had no fear” walking across a crowded room to give her phone number to a possible interest “in case he wanted to call.”

By the twentieth century parents had stopped introducing their daughters to men who would make suitable spouses. No longer was it possible for parents to find a compatible suitor for their daughter with religion, politics, social class, and income playing second fiddle to age, maturity, and a gentlemanly demeanor. The three women interviewed were taught above all to *demand* respect and to *not* compromise their values and morals for anything. These days a girl needs to only be who she is and show her true colors to find a husband. Social status and a dowry were not as important as they had been previously leaving doors wide open for women all over the United States.

Parents were still concerned with their daughters’ freedom and wanted their daughters to experience everything that they could before marriage. As

human beings we only have one life to live and should enjoy it to the fullest extent. Yet some parents were not as trusting in their daughters as others and warned against the consequences of a one night stand or bad relationships that could lead to negative consequences. As some parents wanted to see their children leave the nest and build families of their own others did not want their daughters to grow up. Especially, for the most over protective parents, every little girl dreams of a flowing, white gown and a day devoted solely to her. The dream of marriage and a family of one's own is inevitable.

### **Where art thou Romeo?**

But before we can begin decorating and making our castle into a home, we must first supply said castle with a prince. Now chances are the prince was not going to be charming, he might be more reminiscent of the Beast. Yet once in a while women will cross paths with the right man and fireworks will start to fly. Girls the world over ask their mom on a daily basis “How do I know he’s the one?” and receive the inevitable answer of “You just know.” The only way to find out for sure is to put him to a few tests.

Opening the door is sweet, paying for dinner is gentlemanly, and remembering your birthday is expected. These are simple tasks any monkey could perform. Yet for women who went to college immediately after high school, their experiences may differ from others. Women in college had even more opportunity to mix, mingle, and get to know men from different backgrounds and with different interests. Studying for an economics exam could let you know how he feels about money and women in the work force, while studying for

psychology could warn a young woman of a man who was domineering or abusive. These simple tests could strengthen a potential relationship in the early stages of its existence or doom it.

The real test is when the gentleman goes the extra mile to show that he cares. Lisa knew that her husband was “the one” when he would drive from Camp Lejeune, North Carolina to Stillwater, New York (roughly a fifteen hour drive one way) just to see her for a “long” weekend of three days. Mary recalls her husband driving from Fort Bragg, North Carolina to Patrick Air Force Base in Cocoa Beach, Florida (another twelve hour drive) every weekend after work to visit her and the kids. Acts like this prove that courting does not, and should not, stop after you tie the knot.

After finding an honorable and worthy prince, the next step is to become engaged. The next question I raised of my interviewees was the question of proposals. I wanted to know how smooth their men were when popping the question. I have to say I was shocked and amused and find myself laughing even now.

It should not come as a shock knowing the first person I wanted to talk to was my mother, Lisa. Now I know my dad is not the most romantic guy around and I understand that being in the military, distance was an issue. However, I think that he could have approached the situation differently rather than asking my mother to marry him on the telephone. Granted he made up for it by putting the ring in the pocket of a jacket that he promised her, this idea is more original, and personal, than a phone call. When dealing with a long distance relationship,

the telephone was a way to keep in touch between the arrivals of letters. The telephone became an important element in many courtships as a way for couples to “make plans...or make peace”<sup>46</sup> if need be.

### **Suburban Castle**

The last topic touched on was centered on the women’s marriage as a whole, concerning duties in the home, careers if applicable, pressures, and anything extra they wanted to share. Once again the answers I received were different yet they held similar characteristics. The domestic duties of the average woman do not change much from house to house. All women were in concurrence that there were not set duties for them to do in the home but the majority of cooking, cleaning, laundry, and taking care of the kids fell on their shoulders.

At some point in their lives each woman also held a job outside of the home to add to the family income. While this did increase the family fortune it also came with added inside and outside pressures. A wife, and mother, working outside of the home was able to assist in improving the family’s socioeconomic status in life. Yet her being out of the house may mean that a babysitter was needed for young children, that the housework would be neglected until she got home, or that dinner would not be ready immediately. Even though the income may allow for extra toys or trips, the children may suffer from a lack of regularity and feel ignored, or they may be learning bad habits under the guidance of another.

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<sup>46</sup> Rothman, *Hands & Hearts*, 223.

A woman might also have to contend with her husband. A man may feel that his role as sole breadwinner and supporter of the family was threatened if his wife took a job outside of the home. This could create a tension between the two concerning who earned more or who worked harder. Another issue could arise with the care of the children. If a woman was at work, along with her husband, she may expect more assistance around the house and with the children, especially if she came home to crying babies, a house that needed to be cleaned, and supper that needed to be cooked. There were obvious benefits to both husband and wife working outside of the home, yet there were also drawbacks. A couple needed to communicate their feelings and be honest with one another concerning what role each would play in their family, and relationship, so the other would not become overburdened or overworked.

Each woman gave me her input on what was necessary for a successful and healthy relationship. Rita stated that communication and listening skills are needed, especially when dealing with men, and in turn love will remain unconditionally. Rita was concerned mostly with the emotional intimacies that come along with marriage. Her view of marriage resembles the description of an ideal mate as defined by President John Adams. Adams states that the ideal mate “was willing to palliate faults and mistakes, to put the best construction upon words and action, and to forgive injuries.”<sup>47</sup> A relationship in which both individuals were open verbally, emotionally, and physically was more likely to succeed, even in the eighteenth century.

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<sup>47</sup> Coontz, 21.

Like her mother, Lisa was also concerned with communication and the assignment of roles in the relationship. Attempting to avoid bad memories, I asked Lisa what she bothered her the most when she first got married. She immediately began by saying she resented the fact that Michael (her husband) would write the checks for the first few trips to the grocery store. Lisa saw this as her role and wanted to be the sole keeper of the checkbook. As the spouse who ran the house, did the grocery shopping, and cooking it seemed only right for her to be in charge of spending money that was needed to keep the household running smoothly. My father had no problem handing over the checkbook then, but I am sure some days he wishes he could take it back. Lisa communicated what was troubling her and gave a solution to the problem. She did not want to be a copycat of a Republican wife whose sole duty was to keep the home and shop through her husband for goods. The lines of communication were wide open and Lisa took advantage of that setting a precedent for the next twenty-two years of marriage.

### **Conclusion**

Discussing the impact that choosing a partner had on a woman, and the choices that she was given, is very important in understanding our history and where we come from as a society. It was not easy to choose a partner in the seventeenth century, nor is it easy to choose one today. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries it was difficult to find a man who would take care of you and share his good name. No matter the time period or a woman's station in life, she had to make the choice that would change her life. Even while some women

were able to choose marriage for love, their social and economic wellbeing was always in the back of their mind. Women were not given the freedom to make choices for themselves even considering the social and political advances after the Revolution.

The changing times improved a woman's role in society by the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Marriage for love and compatibility was expected. Young girls were worried about a man's economic status in the terms of him affording dinner and a movie. Social status was a consideration when a young woman preferred reservations at a five star restaurant rather than the burger joint on the corner. Political and religious compatibility was not as important as it had been in the 1600 and 1700's. Parental influence had slacked off to becoming almost nonexistent, as many parents wanted their daughters to experience life on their own. As long as a woman was loved above all, while remaining her own person and retaining her sense of freedom, the match was good.

Courtship is a subject that is often overlooked and forgotten because many people assume all the information concerned with it is love letters, poems, whirlwind engagements, and marriages. If courtship is looked at through a social, economic, or political standpoint then it is as valuable as any other event in history, and in some cases more so. Diaries, letters, and other forms of correspondence set the scene for alliances between great families, discrepancies among others, and the beginning of women gaining, and eventually retaining, power over their own life choices.



The evolution of courting and marriage has changed from a good economic and social match to a partnership of love and communication. Society is not as concerned with a daughter marrying into a wealthy family any more as long as she is happy and does not end up in an abusive relationship. While money, education, politics, and religion do play a role in choosing a life partner, they are not the only qualifications. A woman should not settle for less than she deserves because it is an easy way out. Our foremothers did not risk their reputations, relationships, and lives to see modern women sitting in a parlor and entertaining men, wasting their minds and lives away with pointless conversation. The women of today's society are expected to go out into the world and get their kicks while they can still get them, with or without a man.

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