



The Armada Portrait (about 1588) by George Gower.

Courtship and Marriage *in Elizabethan Times*

Elizabeth I (1533-1603) received many offers of marriage but she chose not to accept any of them and remained unmarried all her life. This was very unusual for those times. Women and men from all social classes in the sixteenth century were expected to marry. Marriage gave them not only status but also the possibility of having heirs¹.

Life for a single woman wasn't easy in Elizabethan times but perhaps Elizabeth never married because she didn't want to lose her independence. After marriage, the law gave a husband full rights over his wife. She became part of his property. Most people got married in their mid- or late-twenties although it was legal for boys to marry at the age of 14 and girls at 12 with their parents' permission. The

1. **heirs** : the people who receive money or property when someone dies.



Scene from the film *Elizabeth – The Golden Age* (2007).

sons and daughters from noble² or rich families usually married at a younger age than those from the lower classes. This was because poorer couples had to wait until they had enough money or possessions to start a home of their own.

Elizabethans were free to choose their partners but arranged marriages were common among the upper classes. An arranged marriage was more like a business arrangement than a relationship between two people. It was a way for the families on both sides to obtain property, money and useful friends.

However, marriage wasn't seen only as a business arrangement. Elizabethans also thought that real love was important in a good marriage, too. In order to give real love time to grow, a period of courtship was usual before the relationship became serious. Courting allowed the man and the woman to get to know each other better before they made any binding³ promises. A courting couple could meet at their homes, not always very private because other family members were there, and also alone in parks, fields and gardens. They often gave each other precious gifts like coins, rings and lockets⁴, but more practical gifts were also popular, like gloves, belts, purses, ribbons⁵ and slippers.

2. **noble** : belonging to the highest social class.

3. **binding** : something that you cannot legally stop or avoid.

4. **locket** : a piece of jewellery containing something such as a picture.

5. **ribbons** : small decorative strips of cloth which are given to someone to wear on their clothes.

Courting wasn't a promise to marry someone and courtship didn't always end in a wedding. This was perhaps a good thing because divorce, as we know it today, didn't exist in those days.

When a man and a woman decided to marry, they became betrothed. Being betrothed was a formal state that was as binding as marriage. At a betrothal ceremony, the couple exchanged vows, or promises, to be faithful to each other. The man gave the woman a ring to wear on her right hand. Then they kissed and signed the contract. When they married later in church, the ring was put on the left hand. The couple had to announce their intention to marry on each of the three Sundays before their wedding day. This was called 'crying the banns'. During these three weeks there was time to stop the wedding if it was discovered, for example, that one of the couple was already married.

Weddings were held in church because they were always religious ceremonies. It wasn't necessary for the couple to send wedding invitations because communities were small and everybody knew what was happening.

The Elizabethan bride didn't wear a white dress on her wedding day. Wearing white was a later tradition that became popular in the 1800s. She wore her best



Scene from the film *Shakespeare in Love* (1998).

dress, made of silk or velvet⁶ if she came from a rich family, or linen, cotton or wool if she came from a poorer family. She often decorated her dress with flowers and she also wore flowers in her hair, which she wore loose over her shoulders. Unmarried girls were allowed to wear their hair loose but after they were married they had to hide it under a hat.

She carried a bouquet or a garland⁷ of roses and rosemary, decorated with ribbons. This was made by her bridesmaids. Rosemary was used because it symbolized fidelity⁸.

After the marriage, there was a wedding dinner to celebrate. The Elizabethans loved dishes which are very unusual to us, like small birds in a pie, hedgehogs⁹ or roast swan¹⁰. Richer people might even have had an exciting new bird, the turkey, recently introduced from America. They were keen on presenting dishes as attractively as possible, too. If they were eating peacock, for example, they decorated the dish with its colourful feathers.

The tradition of having a wedding cake began in the mid-17th century. At Medieval and Elizabethan weddings, a pile of sweet buns was put in front of the bride and groom and they had to kiss over them without knocking the pile down. There was beer, mead (a sweet wine made from honey) or wine, sometimes spiced, to accompany the food. There wasn't usually any water because it wasn't safe to drink it.

1 Comprehension check

Answer the questions.

- 1 Why was it important for people to marry in the sixteenth century?
- 2 At what age could a girl be legally married?
- 3 What were the advantages of arranged marriages?
- 4 How was courtship different from betrothal?
- 5 Why was rosemary a popular choice for the bride's bouquet?
- 6 What did the bride and groom have to do with the pile of sweet buns?

6. **velvet** : a kind of cloth that is soft on one side and smooth on the other.



9. **hedgehog** :



7. **garland** :



8. **fidelity** : lasting support.

10. **swan** :

