Wedding sermons in early modern England

Wedding Sermons in Early Modern England

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This article draws on wedding sermons published in England between the 1580s and the 1740s. The main interest of these sermons lies in the ways in which doctrine based on the scriptural texts, especially those cited in the Form of Solemnization of Matrimony, was refracted through the prism of the various concerns and priorities of preaching clergy. Their exposition of marriage duties was often enriched by personal experience. Yet the number of wedding sermons published in England between the 1580s and the 1740s was small compared with the quantity of those reaching print after delivery at a funeral, another of the foremost rites of passage. It seems likely that many fewer of them were preached at weddings in the first place. Wedding congregations probably made a less receptive audience. The already limited publication of wedding sermons underwent a long-term eighteenth-century decline.

Early modern English sermons have been the subject of much recent research. Prominent topics of this research have included those sermons' themes, delivery, audiences and role in promoting religious change. Sermons preached at court, before parliament, in the universities and parishes, on anniversaries and festival days, and during assizes, fasts and funerals, have all been discussed.[1] Little attention has, however, been given to wedding sermons.[2] This article is based

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[1] See especially Peter McCullough, Hugh Adlington and Emma Rhatigan, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of the Early Modern Sermon* (Oxford, 2011); Lori Anne Ferrell and Peter McCullough, eds, *The English Sermon Revised: Religion, Literature and History 1600–1750* (Manchester, 2000); Arnold Hunt, *The Art of Hearing: English Preachers and their Audiences, 1590–1640* (Cambridge, 2010); Peter McCullough, *Sermons at Court: Politics and Religion in Elizabethan and Jacobean Preaching* (Cambridge, 1998); Mary Morrissey, *Politics and the Paul's Cross Sermons, 1558–1642* (Oxford, 2011).

[2] But see Jacqueline Eales, 'Gender Construction in Early Modern England and the Conduct Books of William Whately (1583–1639)', in R. N. Swanson, ed., *Gender and Christian*

Studies in Church History 59 (2023), 222–243
doi: 10.1017/stc.2023.10

on some forty wedding sermons published between the 1580s and the 1740s. Occasioned by actual weddings, they were the ones most readily identifiable by means of a title search. The majority purported to be versions of what had been preached at the wedding itself, soon afterwards, or in one case at a contract beforehand.[3] Some sermons celebrating royal weddings have been included. The article will first examine the relationship between the wedding sermon and the nuptial rites. It will then consider the preachers of wedding sermons and their motives for publishing such sermons. Analysis of the content of sermons will show that despite most preachers' consensus with regard to fundamental doctrines of marriage, individual differences of approach, theme and emphasis introduced considerable variety as well as changes over time. A tentative explanation of the relative paucity in numbers of surviving sermons will be offered.

The Wedding Sermon and the Marriage Service

The principal source text for the Form of Solemnization of Matrimony in the 1549 Book of Common Prayer was the *Ordo ad faciendum sponsalia* according to the use of Sarum, the most widely employed marriage rite in late medieval England. The partners' mutual commitment to lifelong love, honour and support, with the wife's pledge of obedience, had been signified by the response '*volo*' ('I will'), to the officiant's question (in Latin in the published version of the rite, but presumably spoken in English in practice). The words of trothplight, 'I N. take thee N … and thereto I geve thee my trouth', had been in English in the earlier rite, with only minor differences in wording. So too had been the man's placing of the ring on the woman's left hand accompanied by his affirmation that he worshipped her with his body and endowed her with all his worldly goods. One of two alternative psalms included in the Prayer Book, Psalm 128, also came from the pre-Reformation service. It promises the God-fearing man that his wife shall be like a fruitful

Religion, SCH 34 (Cambridge, 1998), 163–74; Erica Longfellow, '"the office of a man and wife" in John Donne's Marriage Sermons', *John Donne Journal* 29 (2010), 17–32; Robert Matz, ed., *Two Early Modern Marriage Sermons: Henry Smith's* A Preparative to Marriage *(1591) and William Whately's* A Bride-Bush *(1623)* (Abingdon, 2016).

[3] Henry Smith, *A Preparatiue to Mariage. The Summe whereof was spoken at a contract, and inlarged after* (London, 1591), 1–2.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2023.10 Published online by Cambridge University Press

vine and his children like olive branches. Several prayers came from the Sarum rite. One, shortly before the close of the new service, conveyed a warning that that it would never be lawful to put asunder those whom God had made one by matrimony.[4]

In the new service Thomas Cranmer rearranged and added to the materials taken from the Sarum rite. A notable addition was the celebrant's preliminary reminder of the origin, nature and purposes of holy matrimony. It was an honourable estate instituted by God in paradise, and signified the mystical union between Christ and his church (as the sacramental blessing in the nuptial mass had declared). Christ adorned it with his presence at Cana, where he performed his first miracle. It was not to be undertaken lightly, but in the fear of God. It had been ordained for three causes: the procreation of children, as a remedy against sin and (as is implicit in the pledges exchanged by the marriage partners before and after the Reformation) for the partners' mutual society, help and comfort in prosperity and adversity.[5]

The Sarum marriage rite did not include a sermon. The Augustinian canon John Mirk, a prolific author of sermons, described in his *Sermo de nupciis*, probably in the later 1380s, the creation of marriage in paradise by the Holy Trinity, whose votive mass was celebrated at weddings. Mirk's sermon is largely a commentary on the marriage rite, with anecdotal warnings against adultery.[6] A different account of marriage appears in *Dives and Pauper*, an early fifteenth-century treatise on the Ten Commandments, probably written by a Franciscan friar. It represented the sacrament of unity and endless love between God and man, between Christ and Holy Church, between Christ and the Christian soul. Following Paul, the author wrote that every man should love his wife as himself; women must be subject to their husbands as the church is to Christ. God made Eve of Adam's rib because that was next to his heart; not of his

[4] *Manuale ad vsum percelebris ecclesie Sarisburiensis* (Rouen, 1543), fols xlvii^{r}–lvi^{r}; F. E. Brightman, *The English Rite*, 2 vols (London, 1915), 2: 802–13; Eric Josef Carlson, *Marriage and the English Reformation* (Oxford, 1994), 44–6; David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford, 1997), 336–47.

[5] Brian Cummings, ed., *The Book of Common Prayer: The Texts of 1549, 1559, and 1662* (Oxford, 2011), 64, 157, 434–5.

[6] Susan Powell, ed., *John Mirk's Festial, edited from British Library MS Cotton Claudius A.II*, 2 vols, EETS original series 334–5 (Oxford, 2009, 2011), 2: 252–6, 442–8.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2023.10 Published online by Cambridge University Press

foot to be his thrall, nor of his head to be his master, but to be his fellow and helper.[7]

The first three Prayer Books of 1549, 1552 and 1559 envisaged that a sermon declaring 'the office of man and wife' would normally be included in a communion service immediately following the celebration of marriage. There is scant evidence to show how widespread nuptial communions were in practice. According to one observer 'This custome was [rarely] used, by the better sort of people before the Civill warrs'.[8] The 1662 book merely declared it convenient that the couple should receive communion when they were married or at the first subsequent opportunity, but still allowed for the possibility that there might be a sermon.[9] It seems quite likely, but is impossible to demonstrate, that sermons were sometimes preached without a communion, even when communion was compulsory in principle.

If there were no sermon, the minister was to read prescribed passages from the epistles of the apostles Paul and Peter setting out the most important duties of husbands and wives. The husband's obligations came first. St Paul had commanded them to love their wives as Christ loved the church; 'So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies'. For this cause a man was to leave his parents, and be joined to his wife, and they would become one flesh (Eph. 5: 25–33). Husbands were forbidden to be bitter towards their wives (Col. 3: 19). St Peter, himself a married man, had told married men to dwell with their wives 'according to knowledge', that is, understanding, giving honour to the wife as to the weaker vessel, and as heirs together of the grace of life, that is, their shared Christian life (1 Pet. 3: 7). For their part, wives were to submit to their husbands as to the Lord; they were to be subject to their own husbands in all things (Eph. 5: 22–4; Col. 3: 18). Husbands who did not obey the word, St Peter had added, might be won by their wives' chaste behaviour and fear (or reverence). He reminded them that their ornament should be that of a meek and quiet spirit, not outward adornment (1 Pet. 3: 1–6).

[7] Priscilla Heath Barnum, ed., *Dives and Pauper*, vol. 1/2, EETS original series 280 (Oxford, 1980), 60–2, 65–6.
[8] John Aubrey, *Remaines of Gentilisme and Judaisme*, in idem, *Three Prose Works*, ed. John Buchanan-Brown (Fontwell, 1972), 127–304, at 185.
[9] Cummings, ed., *Book of Common Prayer,* 69–71, 162–4, 440–1.

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The work of official marriage guidance that reached the largest audience in early modern England may have been 'An Homily of the State of Matrimony' (1563). It was included in the second volume of *Sermons or Homilies* primarily intended for non-preaching clergy to read to their congregations.[10] Most of it consisted of loose translations of passages from an exhortation by the preacher Veit Dietrich of Nuremberg (1506–49) and St John Chrysostom's twenty-sixth homily on 1 Corinthians.[11] Passages from Dietrich sought to arm couples against the devil's 'principal craft, to work dissension of hearts of the one from the other'. There were few marriages without 'chidings, brawlings, tauntings, repentings, bitter cursings, and fightings'. The husband 'ought to be the leader and author of love', making allowances for the wife's weakness. It was hard for women to 'relinquish the liberty of their own rule'. Nevertheless, Chrysostom had insisted, they must obey even harsh husbands, and resist the temptation to remind those husbands of their duty to them. A wife might even have to endure being beaten, although Chrysostom had absolutely forbidden husbands to beat their wives. The worst of wives were to be 'admonished and holpen' but also treated with forbearance. Prayer was the best remedy for all the trials of marriage.[12]

The official provision for sermons to be preached at English weddings helps to explain the first print publication of such sermons in the late sixteenth century. They formed part of a burgeoning literature of pastoral advice for a lay readership concerning 'Domesticall Duties'.[13] Broadly speaking, historians have subscribed to one of four views, or a combination of them, about the nature and effect of this literature. Some have stressed what they see as its enhanced appreciation of marriage, including sexual fulfilment, compared with pre-Reformation teaching; others have emphasized its patriarchal character and its promotion of the authority of husbands and fathers. A third view underlines the continuity of the most important elements of advice through the Reformation, while a fourth, although

[10] Ashley Null, 'Official Tudor Homilies', in McCullough, Adlington and Rhatigan, eds, *Oxford Handbook of the Early Modern Sermon*, 348–65, at 359–60; Cummings, ed., *Book of Common Prayer,* 683.
[11] John Griffiths, ed., *The Two Books of Homilies Appointed to be read in Churches* (Oxford, 1859), xxxvi–xxxviii, 500, 506.
[12] Ibid. 500–15.
[13] William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties eight treatises* (London, 1622).

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conceding substantial continuity of ideals, emphasizes important differences between pre-Reformation and Protestant writing. The sixteenth-century Protestant reformers inherited and developed an ideal of marriage that combined husbandly authority with love and close companionship. They also made Scripture the foundation of their teaching to an extent unequalled in medieval guidance. They brought to bear in their advice to the laity the lessons of their own experience of marriage, now open to the clergy through the abolition of compulsory priestly celibacy. They addressed the problems of marriage in greater detail and more exhaustively than had previous writers.[14]

Preachers and Publication

The wedding sermon was never the preserve of men who belonged to a particular position on the religious spectrum. Between the 1580s and the civil wars, wedding preachers included both distinguished conformists and notable puritans. Among the former were men favoured by James I, royal connoisseur of sermons, such as Robert Abbot, John King, Anthony Maxey and Robert Wilkinson.[15] The most famous of these preachers was John Donne, the author of three surviving wedding sermons. His exceptional distinction has ensured his wedding sermons a large share of scholarly attention. They were however atypical of the genre. A penetrating analysis has shown how Donne equivocated, adopted a tone of dry irony, largely evaded some questions customarily posed in wedding sermons, and used humour to offset potentially unpalatable advice.[16] Puritan authors included Henry Smith and William Whately, whose wedding sermons, greatly expanded in their published form, became famous and oft-reprinted works of marriage guidance, as well as William Crompton, Thomas Gataker and Thomas Taylor.

Some of the better known authors of sermons printed after 1650, Nathaniel Hardy, Richard Meggot and William Secker, published

[14] Kathleen M. Davies, 'Continuity and Change in Literary Advice on Marriage', in R. B. Outhwaite, ed., *Marriage and Society: Studies in the Social History of Marriage* (London, 1981), 58–80; Eales, 'Gender Construction', 164–6; Matz, ed., *Two Early Modern Marriage Sermons*, 'Introduction', 1–14.
[15] McCullough, *Sermons at Court*, 7, 106, 117, 124, 128, 130, 138, 192, 210–11.
[16] Longfellow, 'Donne's Marriage Sermons', 17–32.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2023.10 Published online by Cambridge University Press

their work during the Interregnum, but made successful careers in the Restoration church. However, few clergy of the established church published wedding sermons between 1660 and 1750; they were not well-known preachers. Nonconformist wedding preachers included Benjamin Aycrigg, William Harris, Thomas Manton and John Shuttlewood. The great majority of Nonconformists, save for the Quakers, complied with the legal requirement that marriages be celebrated by a minister of the established church.[17] Some Anglican clergy may have been prepared to allow Dissenting colleagues to preach at a wedding celebrated in their churches. Alternatively, a sermon could have been preached after the marriage had taken place.

It was presumably one or more of the couple's 'friends', including parents, or perhaps in some cases the couple themselves, who typically decided whether a sermon should be given and, if so, who should deliver it. Sermons were often preached from notes and might then be written out in full.[18] After Matthew Lawrence had preached at the wedding of Sir William Armyne's son at Chilton (Suffolk) in August 1649, Sir William, Lawrence's 'Singular good Friend, and Patron', asked to see his notes. Instead Lawrence had his sermon beautifully written and decorated in imitation of a printed book by a professional scribe, and dedicated it to Sir William.[19] Some of the wedding sermons that survive in print, including those delivered by John Donne, never got beyond the stage of private manuscript circulation during their authors' lifetimes, and were published posthumously, either for profit or in tribute to their authors. There was a widespread reluctance on the part of preachers to embrace print until the early seventeenth century.[20]

The titles or dedications of roughly sixty per cent of the wedding sermons in print identify the couple whose nuptials had occasioned their preaching. Besides members of the royal family, most of the partners belonged to the gentry or, in a few cases, to London merchant families. Sermons that their authors designed or adapted for

[17] Rebecca Probert, *Marriage Law and Practice in the Long Eighteenth Century: A Reassessment* (Cambridge, 2009), 145–51, 160; John Shuttlewood, *Marriages Made in Heav'n: A Wedding Sermon*, 2nd edn (London, 1712), 7.
[18] Hunt, *Art of Hearing*, 133–4; Morrissey, *Paul's Cross Sermons*, 36–8.
[19] Los Angeles, UCLA William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, MS 1951.018, fols ix–x, online at: <http://www.calisphere.org/item/ark:/21198/n14g8t/>, accessed 22 July 2022; compare also Hunt, *Art of Hearing*, 135–7.
[20] Hunt, *Art of Hearing*, 120–6.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2023.10 Published online by Cambridge University Press

a larger audience were less likely to convey such information. Several of the prefatory epistles that precede the majority of printed wedding sermons were addressed to the couple at whose marriage the sermon had been preached, a partner in the marriage or a close relative of one spouse, as in the case of Sir William Armyne. A few were addressed to other couples known to the preacher in recognition of their happy or exemplary marriages. Occasionally the author chose one or more of his own relatives. An actual or potential patron of his might belong to any of these categories. A few were simply addressed to the 'Christian reader' or the 'courteous reader'. Publication seems to have been due to the preacher's initiative in the majority of cases. Some authors attributed it to a request from a patron or one of the couple concerned, or to importunate friends.[21]

Few authors indicated clearly how they had altered the text of their sermon between original composition and publication.[22] Some clearly added new material. Henry Smith's tract *A Preparatiue to Mariage* (1591) was explicitly described as having been 'inlarged' after first delivery. William Whately claimed in a preface to the first authorized version of his *Bride-Bvsh* (1619) that he had given a copy to a friend, and found it published the previous year without his privity. 'Hence I was occasioned', he continued, 'to peruse certaine larger notes, which I had lying by me of that subiect'.[23] As a result he produced a treatise four times as long as the sermon published in 1617. Smith's and Whately's works had expanded from sermons into what we would regard as larger tracts. Even in the first surviving version of his *Bride-Bvsh,* published without his privity but already designed for a wider readership, Whately wrote that he would have preferred to preach without a text: 'No one place of Scripture doth either directly containe, or plainly expresse the full dutie of the married couple: which yet from many places may well bee collected into

[21] William Secker, *A Wedding Ring Fit for the Finger: Or, the Salve of Divinity on the sore of Humanity. Laid open in a Sermon at a Wedding in Edmonton* (London, 1658), 6–7; Richard Meggot, *The Rib Restored: or, The Honour of Marriage, A Sermon Preached in Dionis-Back-Church, occasioned by a Wedding* (London, 1656), sigs A2^{r}–^{v}.

[22] See Hunt, *Art of Hearing*, 147–63, 'Revising the Sermon'.

[23] William Whately, *A Bride-Bvsh: or, A Direction for Married Persons. Plainely describing the Dvties Common to both, and peculiar to each of them. By performing of which, marriage shall prooue a great helpe to such, as now for want of performing them, doe finde it a little hell* (London, 1619), sig. A1^{r}.

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the body of one discourse.'[24] Given the wedding preacher's brief to declare 'the office of a man and wife', it is difficult to draw a hard and fast distinction between wedding sermons and other forms of marriage guidance.[25] A chosen text nevertheless allowed preachers to focus on a particular aspect of the subject.

The majority of printed wedding sermons had probably undergone some revision or elaboration between delivery and publication. Some of them were nevertheless short enough to have been delivered during the hour that was an acceptable duration for an early modern sermon.[26] In 1658, William Secker could claim that what his *A Wedding Ring* had been in preaching, so it was in publishing. Nothing had been added to it. The first edition of 1658 was 'Printed for the Authour, onely to be disposed of to his friends.' Secker's was one of the pithiest yet most comprehensive of wedding sermons, and this no doubt helps to explain why it was frequently reprinted in England, Scotland and North America, and translated into Welsh and German, while most wedding sermons were printed only once or twice.[27]

Defence of Marriage

Early modern wedding sermons most commonly followed the pattern approved by the celebrated preacher William Perkins: the explication of the chosen text, the extraction from it of 'a few and profitable points of doctrine' and their application to the 'life and manners' of his audience.[28] Authors cited in their sermons several additional scriptural texts that reinforced the doctrines educed from the verse or passage on which the sermon had been preached, and usually referred to other authorities, which might include medieval and contemporary writers as well as fathers of the church. Many preachers,

[24] William Whately, *A Bride-Bvsh, or A Wedding Sermon: Compendiously describing the duties of Married Persons* (London, 1617), sig. A3.
[25] Compare Hunt, *Art of Hearing*, 161.
[26] Ibid. 157; Morrissey, *Paul's Cross Sermons*, 36.
[27] Secker, *Wedding Ring*, 6; H. R. French, 'Secker, William (d. 1681?)', *ODNB*, online edn (2004), at: <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/>, accessed 20 September 2021; see also an eighteenth-century miscellany, *Conjugal Duty: set forth in a Collection of Ingenious and Delightful Wedding-Sermons*, 2 vols (London, 1732, 1736), 1: 33–50.
[28] Greg Kneidel, '*Ars Praedicandi:* Theories and Practice', in McCullough, Adlington and Rhatigan, eds, *Oxford Handbook of the Early Modern Sermon*, 3–20, at 13–16.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2023.10 Published online by Cambridge University Press

more especially in the early seventeenth century, also delighted in simile, metaphor and allegory as means of enlivening their sermons and holding their hearers' attention.

Wedding preachers drew both on passages suggested by the *Form of Solemnization* and ones found elsewhere in both testaments. The account of marriage duties in Ephesians 5, the description of marriage as honourable in Hebrews 13: 4, the narrative of Eve's creation in Genesis 2, the report of Christ's first miracle at Cana in John 2, and Psalm 128, with its comparison between the wife of the God-fearing man and the fruitful vine, were all employed by more than one preacher. So too was the praise of the good wife in Proverbs 31: 10–31. The *Form of Solemnization* instructed preachers to declare 'the office of man and wife'. Besides the duties of spouses two recurrent themes of wedding sermons from the sixteenth century to the eighteenth were the defence of marriage as an institution and the criteria held to be important in the choice of marriage partners.

The defence of marriage was especially important for the Protestant clergy, many of whom were married. Some preachers did not simply rely on the highly positive scriptural passages cited in the marriage service but addressed the more mixed messages sent by St Paul in 1 Corinthians 7, where in verse 8 he advised the unmarried and widows to remain celibate, as he himself was.[29] A broad consensus emerged. It was right for most men to marry, but also good for those with the special gift of continence to remain single. Celibacy was appropriate for some men, but marriage was necessary for society, of which it was the essential basis.[30] Throughout the period, preachers rejected the Roman Catholic Church's insistence on clerical celibacy. To forbid marriage was, as described in 1 Timothy 4, a doctrine of devils. It was also hypocritical, as the same passage claimed. Many of the Roman clergy could not contain themselves.[31] Nonetheless,

[29] For example, Meggot, *Rib Restored*, 7–8; Edward Creffield, *A good Wife a great Blessing: or, the Honour and Happiness of the Marriage State in Two Sermons* (London, 1717?), 15–18.
[30] See Secker, *Wedding Ring*, 17–25, for a particularly well-balanced discussion; John King, *Vitis Palatina. A Sermon appointed to be preached at Whitehall vpon the Tuesday after the mariage of the Ladie Elizabeth her Grace* (London, 1614), 3–8.
[31] Smith, *Preparatiue to Mariage*, 15–17; Thomas Taylor, *A Good Husband and a Good Wife: Layd Open* (London, 1625), 7; Samuel Wright, *A Sermon on Marriage Preached at Black-Fryers* (London, 1734), 16–19.

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John Donne insisted, the Roman Church injured the Church of England in saying that the latter preferred marriage to virginity.[32]

From the later seventeenth century, some felt it necessary to defend marriage in the face of a different challenge: a devaluation of the institution and its obligations. Joseph Fisher identified some causes of that devaluation in a sermon that he dedicated to his friend and former pupil Thomas Lambard. In that profane and profligate age, Fisher claimed, men generally clamoured against God's institutions on the ground of reason among other things. He specifically mentioned 'Audacious and Ungodly Dealers with the Word of God' (i.e. authors of controversial works of biblical exegesis). 'The trifling and jesting humour that prevails in talking of this Subject', the Presbyterian Samuel Wright thought in 1734, 'has often prov'd the reason of keeping it out of religious Discourses'. A few years later Thomas Humphreys, vicar of Driffield (Gloucestershire), held a similar opinion. The dignity of marriage had been more depreciated and vilified in the past century than in any previous age. It had shared this fate with the most excellent and worthy things, 'to be burlesqu'd and droll'd upon by a set of empty fops and profane debauchees'.[33]

Humphreys differed from earlier wedding preachers in the extent to which he relied on rational and utilitarian arguments. After emphasizing in conventional fashion that God himself had instituted marriage, he described how it had been practised all over the habitable world by people of different religions. Its 'mighty usefulness' had been apparent even to the unenlightened part of mankind who had no positive command from God. He also gave a new prominence to the value of marriage in promoting individual happiness. It contributed to everything desirable in life, including health, wealth, credit and pleasure. He pictured the delights of a union in which the

[32] John Donne, 'Number 17, Preached at Sir Francis Nethersole's Marriage', in *The Sermons of John Donne,* ed. G. R. Potter and E. M. Simpson, 10 vols (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, 1953–62), 2: 335–47, at 340.

[33] Joseph Fisher, *The Honour of Marriage: or, the Institution, Necessity, Advantages, Comforts, and Usefulness of a Married Life: Set forth in a Sermon January 27. 1694 at Seven-Oak in Kent* (London, 1695), sigs A2^{r}–A3^{v}, 1, 15; Wright, *Sermon on Marriage*, 4; Thomas Humphreys, *Marriage an honourable estate. A Sermon preached at Driffield in Gloucestershire on Occasion of the Happy Marriage of Gabriel Hanger Esq and Mrs Elizabeth Bond* (London, 1742), 3. For further light on the context, see David Fletcher, 'The Clergy and Marriage in Restoration Comedies', in Caroline Bowden, Emily Vine and Tessa Whitehouse, eds, *Religion and Life Cycles in Early Modern England* (Manchester, 2021), 154–72.

https://doi.org/10.1017/stc.2023.10 Published online by Cambridge University Press

partners 'interchangeably express undissembled kindness, and by a frank and honest comportment, adjust themselves to each other in the most tender, obliging, though familiar manner. They reciprocally impart their pleasing ideas, transfuse their satisfactions into each others [*sic*] souls, exchange their joys and divide their griefs.'[34] The marriage pictured by Humphreys is more intimately companionate and closer to equality between the spouses than that presented by any other wedding preacher.

Choice of Marriage Partners

The right choice of partner was the first prerequisite of a good marriage. Shared religious belief was a fundamental criterion. Some preachers had in mind piety contrasted with profanity or indifference, others more specifically a sincere adherence to Protestantism. William Massie delivered the sermon at the marriage of a daughter of Sir Edmond Trafford in the notoriously conservative county of Lancashire in 1586. He emphasized that the husband must fear God and serve him aright, and have a right and righteous faith. Massie would have both partners Protestants, whose sound religion was not that of a Jew, a Turk or a superstitious papist. He went on to describe the essential points of sound religion. The epistle dedicatory described how Sir Edmond, Massie's 'very good patrone', had been a principal protector of God's truth, and had hunted out Jesuits and seminary priests to the uttermost of his power.[35] In 1607, Robert Abbot, elder brother of the future archbishop, preached at the wedding of Sir John Stanhope, son of his patron of the same name and rank. Answering Amos 3: 3, 'Can two walk together except they be agreed?', he asserted the need to walk according to the will and law of God as revealed in Scripture; on the path chalked out for us by the apostles and prophets, 'we neither find the Pope, nor his pardons, nor his masse, nor his images, nor his reliques'.[36] The development of divisions within Protestant ranks attracted

[34] Humphreys, *Marriage an honourable estate*, 6–7, 10–19.
[35] William Massie, *A Sermon Preached at Trafford in Lancashire at the Marriage of a Daughter of the Right Worshipfull Sir Edmond Trafforde Knight the 6 of September Anno 1586* (Oxford, 1586), sigs A2^{r}–^{v}.
[36] Robert Abbot, *A Wedding Sermon preached at Bentley in Darby-shire, vpon Michaelmasse day last past Anno Domini, 1607* (London, 1608), 12–13.

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comparatively little comment in marriage sermons. However, Richard Meggot, who was later to be a staunch defender of the Church of England, felt it especially appropriate to emphasize the importance of religious compatibility in view of the divisions, schism and factions then so evident in England, in a sermon he preached in 1655.[37] Edward Creffield may have thought that some Protestant Dissenters belonged in the category of 'Heterodox or Schismaticall' when around 1717 he alluded to the dangers arising from a match between partners of different religions. Some foolish women, he added, had squandered money among their 'dissenting Teachers'.[38]

Some preachers eloquently welcomed Protestant royal weddings. George Webbe was quick off the mark in greeting Elizabeth Stuart's marriage to the Elector Palatine on 14 February 1613, the very day of the wedding, with a sermon delivered at Steeple Aston (Wiltshire), where he was vicar. His text, Psalm 45: 13–15, supposedly celebrated Solomon's marriage. He praised Elizabeth's 'hatred of Popery and Superstition, her zeale to Gods glory, and sincere profession of the Gospell'. Now she had been granted her wish to be 'matched with a Prince, in Religion, in education, in yeeres, in vertues fit, and fit for none but for her selfe'.[39] Preaching at Whitehall shortly afterwards, John King, bishop of London, forecast that Elizabeth would, in the words of Psalm 128: 3, be a fruitful vine by the sides of Frederick's house, a sanctuary for piety and religion built on the rock of true faith.[40] In 1736, the Nonconformist minister Benjamin Atkinson placed the recently celebrated marriage of Frederick Prince of Wales and Augusta of Saxe-Gotha third in a chain of providential unions, following those of Elizabeth Stuart with Frederick V in 1613 and Mary Stuart with William of Orange in 1677. Taking Isaiah 49: 23 as his text, he hoped that Frederick and Augusta would prove true nursing parents to the church.[41]

Piety and virtue had to take precedence in choosing a marriage partner over beauty, wealth and kinship. The lust that drove many, especially younger people, into precipitate marriages, and avarice, a

[37] Meggot, *Rib Restored*, 25.
[38] Creffield, *A good Wife a great Blessing*, 54–7.
[39] George Webbe, *The Bride Royall, or The Spirituall Marriage betweene Christ and his Church* (London, 1613), 76–8.
[40] King, *Vitis Palatina*, 29–30.
[41] Benjamin Atkinson, *Good Princes Nursing Fathers and Nursing Mothers to the Church* (London, 1736), 11–21.

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calculating greed of gain, were both likely to produce unhappy unions. Henry Smith, writing around 1591, thought that 'where there can be no hope of children, for age and other causes', marriage seemed rather to be sought for wealth or lust. God made unequal matches of old and young ridiculous everywhere.[42] Matches between partners of markedly unequal social status were also to be avoided.[43]

Several scriptural passages spoke of parents bestowing their children (especially daughters) in marriage or finding partners for them. However, some preachers warned, matches inspired by purely material calculations, without consideration of the inclinations of the couple concerned, caused matrimonial misery. Men of wealth may be deceived in the choices they make for their children, warned the famous puritan minister Thomas Gataker around 1620, and even if the parents of the parties agree, 'yet it may be, when they have done all they can, they cannot fasten their affections'.[44] His text was Proverbs 19: 14: 'Houses and Riches are the Inheritance of the Fathers: But a prudent Wife is of the Lord'. As Anthony Maxey put it when preaching at the marriage of Edward Coke's daughter Anne in 1601, 'The band will neuer hold where money knitteth the knot'.[45]

The consent of prospective marriage partners was essential. It was 'a practice dangerous and intolerable in a well-gouerned *State*', William Crompton insisted in a sermon composed around 1630, 'to force an vnion betweene young yeeres; where there is no actuall power to chuse, nor iudgement to discerne'.[46] Affection could not be compelled. Robert Abbot condemned as 'barbarous and wicked' the counsel to marry first and love after, whereby marriages often drew after them a long cord of misery and sorrow.[47] Henry Smith in 1591 and Richard Meggot in 1655 emphasized the need for

[42] Smith, *Preparatiue to Mariage*, 11–12; Bartholomew Parsons, *Boaz and Ruth Blessed* (Oxford, 1633), 34–6.
[43] Meggot, *Rib Restored*, 26; Secker, *Wedding Ring*, 46.
[44] Thomas Gataker, *A Good Wife Gods Gift. A Mariage Sermon on Prov. 19: 14*, separately paginated in idem, *Two Mariage Sermons* (London, 1620), 10–11.
[45] Anthony Maxey, 'A Sermon Preached at the Mariage of the Right Worshipful Ralfe Sadleir Esquier, and Anne Coke, Eldest Daughter of Edward Coke Esquire, Attorney Generall', in idem, *Certaine Sermons Preached before the Kings Maiestie, and else where* (London, 1619), 389–419, at 413.
[46] William Crompton, *A Wedding-Ring fitted to the Finger of every Paire that have or shall meete in the Feare of God* (London, 1632), 26–7.
[47] Abbot, *Wedding Sermon*, 62.

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personal compatibility. Smith likened the well-matched couple to a pair of gloves or hose.[48] 'Divers Men', according to Meggot, 'though in themselves unblameable, are not fit, for Some Women; and divers Women, though in themselves commendable, are not fit for some Men.'[49]

Marriage Duties

The exposition of marriage duties in accordance with the instruction in the Order of Solemnization was naturally the most prominent theme of wedding sermons.[50] Shared religious faith and practice provided the best foundation for marriage. The preachers who said most about domestic religious observance were puritan or Nonconformist divines. William Whately advised that there were two things that would cement and glue the souls of man and wife together: gratitude to God as the matchmaker who had brought them together and their joint practice of 'priuat prayer, good conference, singing of Psalmes, and other like religious exercises'. Such exercises would dig fountains of spiritual love that would still run when 'youthfull & violent affections' had dried up.[51] Thomas Manton (d. 1677), a Presbyterian divine, echoed much of Whately's advice. Both partners had to remember to glorify God for giving each of them a good companion. Awareness of God's hand at work would make it possible the more patiently to bear the crosses incident to marriage and make spouses readier to part with each other when God willed it. The love between married couples should show itself by sincere and real endeavours to bring about one another's spiritual and eternal good.[52] John Shuttlewood, a London Independent minister, exhorted his audience in 1711 to be worshippers of God in their closets and families. Every house should be 'a little Church and Oratory, and the Master the Priest to call on God'. 'Let it be your great Concern', he urged them, 'to promote the Salvation of one anothers Souls'.[53]

[48] Smith, *Preparatiue to Mariage*, 26.
[49] Meggot, *Rib Restored*, 24.
[50] Cummings, ed., *Book of Common Prayer,* 440.
[51] Whately, *Bride-Bvsh* (1617), 9–10.
[52] Thomas Manton, 'A Wedding Sermon', in *Several Discourses Tending to promote Peace & Holiness among Christians. To which are added, Three other distinct Sermons* (London, 1685), 65–95, at 78–86, 94–5 (pagination refers to the three additional sermons).
[53] Shuttlewood, *Marriages Made in Heav'n*, 22–3.

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There was general agreement throughout the period that mutual fidelity was especially important. Henry Smith cited Christ's response to the Pharisees in Matthew 19 to show that only adultery could dissolve marriage. William Whately gave chastity, 'the chaste keeping of each ones body each for other' and cohabitation in house and bed, a paramount status as 'main' duties. He believed that adultery and persistent desertion entitled the wronged spouse to marry another partner. The Church of England, however, unlike several continental Protestant churches, did not sanction the dissolution of the marriage or allow remarriage in either of these cases. In 1621, Whately was to be forced to retract his opinion by the High Commission.[54]

Some of the most eloquent passages in wedding sermons were devoted to an ideal of married love. Paul's advice made it natural to dwell at greater length on the husband's love, but the need for mutual affection was recognized. Unless there was a 'ioyning of hearts, and a knitting of affections together' the marriage existed only in 'shew and name'. Love between man and wife must not be superficial, but entire and inward. It ought to exceed all other kinds of amity and love.[55] The body of each partner belonged to the other, but matrimonial love was not the same as physical passion. Inordinate passion had not existed in paradise.[56] 'Let there be a wise and judicious Love; a *respectful Kindness,* founded in a real Value, and expressed by a tender Care', wrote the Presbyterian minister William Harris in 1700. 'Not a fond or unhallowed Passion, that like a Blaze of Fire, glares and expires in an Instant; but a pure Flame of fervent Love that will burn clear and last long.'[57]

To begin matrimonial concord well, Henry Smith wrote, it was necessary for the couple to learn one another's natures, affections and infirmities. Almost all quarrels in marriage had arisen from the failure of one partner 'to hit the measure of the others heart, to apply themselues to either nature', so that when either was offended, one (as he put it) sharpened the other. He commended the example of a couple who never fell out, despite their choleric dispositions. The husband had explained that 'when her fit is vpon her I yeeld to her, as

[54] Smith, *Preparatiue to Mariage*, 84; Whately, *Bride-Bvsh* (1617), 2–5; Eales, 'Gender Construction', 168.
[55] Smith, *Preparatiue to Mariage*, 44; Maxey, *Certaine Sermons*, 403; Abbot, *Wedding Sermon*, 60–1.
[56] *Sermons of Donne*, 2: 339.
[57] William Harris, *A Wedding Sermon Preach'd On March the 7th, 1699* (London, 1706), 43.

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Abraham did to Sara, and when my fit is vpon me she yeelds to me, and so we neuer striue together'.[58]

The advice given in wedding sermons throughout this period was based on a fundamental assumption of husbandly superiority, as indeed the oft-cited comparison between the couple on the one hand and Christ and the church on the other implied. This superiority included the quality of the husband's love. His responsibility for the government of the family in both religious and worldly regards had to preclude the excessive fondness that might lead him to betray his command. Given the will to mastery common among women, this was all too real a danger. But he was expected to show the tender regard and understanding that would help him to honour the weaker vessel, especially, some preachers emphasized, given her painful and testing experiences in childbirth and the upbringing of children. Husbands should spread a 'mantle of charity' over their wives' infirmities.[59]

God had created Eve from Adam's rib as a helpmeet for him. This implied a close partnership. Since they were of one flesh, it was natural that the husband should love his wife as himself. It was unthinkable that he should beat her, several preachers emphasized: this was the action of a madman. There was one exception to this consensus: William Whately, in the 1619 edition of his *Bride-Bvsh*, very reluctantly came to the conclusion that a husband might beat an exceptionally recalcitrant wife as a last resort.[60]

One duty that belonged more especially to the husband was that of material provision for the family. There was a conventional distinction between the husband's sphere of work, primarily outside the household, and the wife's within it. In any event, the husband was bound to share all his substance with his wife, in accordance with his undertaking during the marriage service. It was the wife's responsibility to make the best use of the common stock in household management.[61]

The wife's foremost duties were reverence and obedience as well as love. While loving her husband, the wife had at the same time to

[58] Smith, *Preparatiue to Mariage*, 46–8.
[59] *Sermons of Donne*, 2: 345–6; Crompton, *Wedding-Ring*, 30; Taylor, *A Good Hvsband*, 25–6; Nathanael Hardy, *Love and Fear the inseperable Twins of a Blest Matrimony* (London, 1653), 5–6, 8–10, 16; Secker, *Wedding Ring*, 42.
[60] Whately, *Bride-Bvsh* (1619), 169–73.
[61] Smith, *Preparatiue to Mariage*, 51–3; Meggot, *Rib Restored*, 17–18.

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honour, respect and obey him. The wife's performance of her obligations had to be underpinned by an inward conviction of her inferiority. King David's first wife Michal had despised him in her heart when she saw him dancing, and she had suffered the punishment of barrenness as a result.[62] The female role in the procreation and nurture of children was crucial. Nothing strengthened the love between husband and wife so much as children.[63] Their procreation was the essential means of renewing and continuing church and society. A wife might advise her husband or even remind him of neglected duties. However, she was bound to obey him in all things not contrary to God's word, and even to put up with ill-treatment. William Secker reminded his readers that 'If thou wouldst have thy wife's reverence, let her have thy respect.'[64] Several preachers warned husbands not to provoke their wives with petty interference or overbearing, insensitive, foolish or discourteous behaviour. For such faults the husband would be answerable to God. The wife had no direct means of redress.

Description of the common and separate duties of husband and wife remained a favoured pattern throughout the period. Some preachers nevertheless focused primarily on the qualities and duties of one partner. The Old Testament, and particularly Proverbs, provided a useful mine of texts for sermons on the good wife. In 1607, at the Anglo-Scottish court marriage of Lord and Lady Hay, one of particular interest to James VI/I, Robert Wilkinson preached on Proverbs 31: 14: 'She is like a Merchants ship, she bringeth her foode from a farre [*sic*].' Soundly built for all life's storms, the wife, like the ship, must be steered by her husband. She must not be borne by the wind or carry too much rigging, in the shape of extravagantly fashionable dress. Wilkinson developed the simile in exhaustive detail.[65] Around 1632, William Loe, vicar of Wandsworth,

[62] John Sprint, *The Bride-Womans Covnseller. Being a Sermon Preach'd at a Wedding* (London, 1700), 12.
[63] Maxey, *Certaine Sermons*, 408.
[64] Secker, *Wedding Ring*, 39.
[65] Robert Wilkinson, *The Merchant Royall. A Sermon Preached at White-Hall before the Kings Maiestie, at the Nuptials of the Right Honourable the Lord Hay, and his Lady* (London, 1607), 6–11, 14–15. For discussion of this sermon's political context, see Lori-Anne Ferrell, 'The Sacred, the Profane and the Union: Politics of Sermon and Masque at the Court Wedding of Lord and Lady Hay', in Thomas Cogswell, Richard Cust and Peter Lake, eds, *Politics, Religion and Popularity in Early Stuart Britain: Essays in Honour of Conrad Russell* (Cambridge, 2002), 45–64.

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responding to Proverbs 31: 10, 'Who can finde a vertuous Woman? for her price is farre above Rubies', affirmed that a gracious and virtuous wife was indeed a rare and choice jewel. His sermon sets out 'the matchless worth of a vertuous wife' and 'the hatefull company and hellish condition of a vitious'. He addressed the latter topic with particular gusto. Loe could not see any great reason why a man should woo a woman. Masculine virtue far outstripped that of women.[66] Much more warmly positive was William Crompton's exposition, around 1630, of Proverbs 31: 29: 'Many daughters haue done vertuously, but thou excellest them all.' Such women deserved high commendation, and their husbands should show their appreciation of their qualities.[67]

In 1699, a Dissenting minister, John Sprint, used 1 Corinthians 7: 34, 'But she that is Married careth for the things of the World, how she may please her Husband', to insist on the wife's subordinate position in the most forthright terms. It was right that woman, created for man's comfort and benefit, but soon the means of his ruin, should actively seek to please and comfort him. Sprint had heard some women say that they had never undertaken to love, honour and obey their husbands. If Sprint had been responsible for marrying them, they would have had to wait until they were ready to do so. He claimed that his sermon had been 'so unhappily represented to the World by some ill-natur'd Females' that he had been compelled to publish it. He imagined that many women might ask why he could not have pitched on the immediately preceding verse 33, taking occasion to tell married men their duties to their wives, or at least brought in husbands to share with wives. He had addressed women largely because they were less able to learn than men and needed more help with a difficult lesson.[68]

If the husband was the superior partner, he must be first in performance of his duty. Expounding Ephesians 5: 33, 'Neverthelesse, let every one of you in particular so love his Wife even as himself, and the Wife (see) that she reverence her Husband',[69] about 1653, Nathanael Hardy devoted about twice as much space to the husband's duties as

[66] William Loe, *The Incomparable Jewell Shewed in a Sermon* (London, 1632), 3–5, 9, 14–17, 31–9.
[67] Crompton, *Wedding-Ring*, 1–24.
[68] Sprint, *Bride-Womans Covnseller*, 1–9.
[69] Brackets in the original.

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to the wife's. The husband's prime duty, Hardy emphasized, was 'first *affection,* secondly *affection,* thirdly *affection*'. This was the mainspring for the performance of his other conjugal duties.[70] The marriage of John Sprint's daughter Mary in 1715 was the occasion for a very different sermon from the one her father had preached in 1699. Benjamin Aycrigg, Dissenting minister at Shepton Mallet, preached at her request, choosing precisely the verse that Sprint had passed over, 1 Corinthians 7: 33. It was 'the Duty of all Husbands', Aycrigg declared, 'diligently and industriously, to … seek all Occasions, to please their Wives' by means of honour, love, tenderness and courtesy. Honour would include the kind reception of an admonition from her. Love meant behaving towards her in marriage as in courtship, showing the same delight in her company and sympathizing in all her troubles.[71]

Relative Paucity of Printed Sermons

Relatively few wedding sermons were published. The numbers in print came nowhere near matching those published after funerals.[72] The chief reason for the contrast is not far to seek. The account of the deceased person attached to a funeral sermon or woven into it was a valued medium of commemoration. It gained additional importance with the growth of religious division and the rise of party during the seventeenth century. The number of wedding sermons known to have been published in print was largest in the early seventeenth century and declined thereafter. We can now begin to take manuscript sermons into account, thanks to the Gateway to Early Modern Manuscript Sermons (GEMMS) database. This project began only recently and is as yet far from complete; so far, however, it has scarcely altered the picture of the relative numbers of known funeral and wedding sermons.[73] The numbers of surviving sermons in print or manuscript do not provide a reliable indication of how many were actually

[70] Hardy, *Love and Fear*, 6.
[71] Benjamin Aycrigg, *The Bridegroom's Counseller, and Bride's Comforter* (London, 1715), 12, 22–33.
[72] For the estimated total of over 1,300 funeral sermons printed *c.*1550– *c.*1750, see Ralph Houlbrooke, *Death, Religion and the Family in England 1480–1750* (Oxford, 1998), 386–7.
[73] At the time of consultation, 559 funeral sermons and 32 marriage or wedding sermons had been included in the database, which spans the years 1530–1715. This is far from giving a complete picture of surviving material, but it gives an idea of the relative numbers

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preached. Reasonably full lists of the sermons preached by individual clergymen are rare. Whilst Ralph Josselin, the conscientious vicar of Earl's Colne in Essex (d. 1683) recorded in his diary several funeral sermons that he preached, he rarely mentioned weddings.[74] The Dissenting minister John Shuttlewood remarked in 1711 that it was a 'usual Custom' to preach a funeral sermon, but not so common to address those who were assuming adult responsibilities.[75]

The eager anticipation of the customarily convivial feast on the part of many wedding guests probably militated against their readiness to hear a long sermon. Preaching early in the seventeenth century on the account in John 2 of Christ's first miracle at the wedding feast at Cana, the puritan minister William Bradshaw emphasized that Christ was no enemy to 'honest mirth & delight, at such meetings and solemnities as this'.[76] He nevertheless condemned the utterly unfitting celebration of marriage feasts all too common in England, with 'laughing and scoffing … beastly and profane Songs, Sonnets, Jiggs, indited by some hellish Spirit'.

In 1775, the Unitarian preacher Richard Elliot remarked that 'though funeral discourses are common from most pulpits, a wedding sermon is very rarely heard of'. There are good grounds for thinking that such sermons had never gained more than limited acceptance. If indeed they had suffered a further decline since the Restoration, they may have suffered from the facetious spirit of which various preachers complained. John Ford, Dissenting minister (possibly an Independent) at Sudbury, declared in 1735 that the topic of marriage was 'very commonly treated in a ludicrous manner in conversation'. Publishing two discourses on the subject, he felt obliged to assure his readers that he had endeavoured to 'guard against everything indecent and ludicrous, not being willing to excite a blush or a smile'.[77] Such

involved: Gateway to Early Modern Manuscript Sermons, online at: <https://gemmsorig.usask.ca>, accessed 8 July 2022.

[74] *The Diary of Ralph Josselin 1616–1683*, ed. Alan Macfarlane (Oxford, 1976).

[75] Shuttlewood, *Marriages Made in Heav'n*, 7–8.

[76] William Bradshaw, *A Mariage Feast*, separately paginated in Gataker, *Two Mariage Sermons*, at E2^{r}–E3^{v}, 3–6, 13–15. Gataker provided the epistle dedicatory to this sermon by his deceased friend Bradshaw. Compare Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 350–76, 'Wedding Celebrations'.

[77] R. Elliot, *A Wedding Sermon: being the Substance of a Discourse delivered at Glass-House Yard on May 14. 1775* (London, 1776), iv; Humphreys, *Marriage an honourable estate*, 3;

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sensitivity to the possibility of seeming ridiculous might have deterred many less determined men from broaching the subject of marriage.

Conclusions

The reformed marriage service of the Church of England included from 1549 onwards the new requirement that the 'office of man and wife' be declared either in a sermon or by the reading of passages from Scripture. Printed wedding sermons contributed to the growing volume of Christian advice literature addressed to the laity by the Protestant clergy. Authors published their sermons for a variety of reasons, ranging from the desire to please a friend or patron to the belief that their counsel could be useful to a wider audience. The wedding sermon was more particularly favoured in certain milieux: Jacobean court circles, the London parishes of godly ministers and post-Restoration dissenting congregations. Preachers achieved with different degrees of success the balance between husbandly love and wifely submission that the apostolic guidance required. Within the outlines that that guidance provided, individual preachers applied the different colours, the various combinations of light and shade that their own experiences of marriage and the wider society suggested. There were some striking contrasts of emphasis between different preachers in their handling of marriage duties. The defence of marriage as an honourable estate was an important theme. From the later seventeenth century onwards, some preachers saw marriage as an institution under threat from irreligion and libertinism. Wedding sermons were never published in numbers that came anywhere near those of printed funeral sermons. There is some evidence that far fewer were preached in the first place, perhaps because of a generally lower level of receptivity among wedding congregations.

Wright, *Sermon on Marriage*, 4; John Ford, *Two Discourses concerning the Necessity and Dignity of the Institution of Marriage* (London, 1735), ii–iii.

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