

Marriage and Land Law in Shakespeare and Middleton.

Nancy Mohrlock Bunker.

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One of the most significant contributions of *Marriage and Land Law in Shakespeare and Middleton* is its insistence upon a 1:1 ratio between the two playwrights studied. Somewhere Gary Taylor is smiling. This exploration of Shakespeare's and Middleton's

respective treatments of marriage and property law features ten unconventionally juxtaposed marriage comedies. Though Shakespeare takes top billing in the title and in each chapter, the book treats the playwrights for the most part as equals. The impressive number of plays examined combined with the author's thorough knowledge of early modern land law and marital contracts makes this book a useful addition to any early modern scholar's library and an indispensable guide for a course devoted to the two playwrights.

Bunker bases the play pairings on the kinds of marriage negotiators and marriages negotiated: the greedy patriarch in *The Taming of the Shrew* and *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, guardians in *All's Well that Ends Well* and *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, marriage against the grain in *Measure for Measure* and *A Mad World My Masters*, brides who broker their own marriages in *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Roaring Girl*, and, finally, companionate marriage in *Much Ado about Nothing* and *No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's*. With the possible exception of *All's Well* (recently redated by scholars) and *A Trick*, the paired plays are not contemporaneous, and in one case the plays are two decades apart (*Shrew* and *Chaste Maid*). Not bound by the time of each play's composition, Bunker insightfully orders the chapters according to the brides' (lack of) power in the setting of financial terms, from Kate and Moll who are subordinate to the wishes of greedy, interfering father figures to autonomous Beatrice and the three brides in *No Wit*, all of whom, Bunker argues, marry their grooms for mutual contentment.

Bunker's materialist-feminist lens uncovers a passel of useful facts and provides angles into these twenty-one marriages that let us see the characters and their actions with refreshed eyes. Bunker's most valuable observation is that despite early modern practices both playwrights refrain from staging or even mentioning jointure bargains, which gave brides some protection should their husbands mismanage the estate during the marriage. The absence of such discussions would have been glaring and possibly alarming omissions to early modern audiences.

In a similar vein, Bunker provides tantalizing glimpses into how audiences might have imagined the afterlife of the plays' marriages. She deduces, for example, that Beatrice brings a bridal portion to her marriage with Benedick amounting to "certainly a minimum of £1,000" (196). She arrives at this number through logic that does not take the setting (Italy) or the time frame (uncertain) into her calculations and without any textual evidence of the lovers' finances. Even more speculatively, Bunker thinks that Nerissa and Gratiano will subsist on lands granted to them by Portia and Bassanio once the dust has settled in Belmont. Whether she is right or wrong about these specifics (and we can never know), Bunker reminds us that providing for the future and contingencies was a protective parent's duty in early modern England.

In the place of a conclusion, Bunker provides a helpful historiographic appendix that painstakingly examines the subtleties of early modern marriage theory and land law. Bunker's omitting a unifying conclusion that makes sense of the patterns each chapter has illuminated is a curious choice. Though Bunker provides a snappy recap of the similarities and differences between the two playwrights at the end of each chapter,

readers are left wondering what, in fact, these intriguing juxtapositions of plays have yielded overall. Also curious is the omission of any discussion about Middleton and Shakespeare's collaborations, Middleton's possible light revision of *All's Well*, or both playwrights' significant ties to the legal world. Overall, however, this book's exploration of Middleton's and Shakespeare's comedies in thematic pairs, its analysis of understudied plays with overstudied ones, is a valuable and much-needed scholarly endeavor.

SID RAY, *Pace University*