

# Gender roles, love, and marriage in seventeenth century england



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Samuel Pepys's Diary is often studied for its first-hand account of important events in London's history. Pepys records information on the Restoration of the Stuart Monarchy, the Plague, and the Great Fire of London, and readers are able to gain a greater understanding of this tumultuous time period through his writing. The Diary, in addition to being a useful piece of historical literature, is a useful tool in dissecting gender roles of the seventeenth century. Along with recording important historical events, Pepys includes smaller details about his life. Details about his marriage, his affairs, and his feelings about both of the aforementioned subjects reveal the restrictive nature of gender roles and the patriarchal institution of marriage of the time period. Pepys was a middle class man with a position in public office, and it could be said that he is a model citizen of the seventeenth century.

Therefore, by examining the marriage of Samuel and Elizabeth Pepys, readers may gain an understanding of the restrictive and double-sided nature of gender roles in a middle class marriage during the late 1600s.

Even in modern criticism of The Diary, readers insist that Pepys seems to, on some level, love Elizabeth, despite his committing numerous acts of adultery and abuse. It is, therefore, crucial to reexamine the definition of love during the seventeenth century in order to evaluate the dynamic of the Pepys's marriage. If Pepys loved his wife, why did he have numerous affairs? Why did he physically abuse his wife? Why did he feel guilt for his actions but continue to do wrong? All of the previous questions can be answered by evaluating the role of gender in the institution of marriage as it was perceived in the seventeenth century. With London being a patriarchal society, the men held the power in marriages, and women were often

thought of as possessions. For middle class men like Pepys, a wife was as important of a possession as nice suit or house. Claire Tomalin, in her book *Samuel Pepys: The Unequalled Self*, discusses the concept of marriage at the time: " Marriage was meant to be a step on the social ladder" (50). Likely, it was not love that drove Samuel and Elizabeth to marry in the first place but societal norms.

Alice Clark, author of *The Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*, argues that Samuel Pepys married as a result of capitalism. She writes, ' That men did not at this time regard marriage as necessarily involving the assumption of a serious economic burden, but on the contrary, often considered it to be a step which was likely to strengthen them in life's battles, is also significant" (39). During the time period, women were nothing more than possessions that could be used to advance ones' social status or well-being. It is likely that Pepys married for the appearance of having a wife rather than actual love. Samuel's treatment of his wife brings forth the problematic nature of the gender roles of the seventeenth century. It was understood that the wife was supposed to bear children and care for them, and the husband was supposed to take care of the family finances. From the beginning of the novel, Samuel hints toward his wife's inability to fulfill her role. He writes about his hoping for a child but his wife not becoming pregnant. While he does not delve into the subject, it can be understood that he is unsatisfied with their childless union.

His dissatisfaction may be the source of his adultery. Throughout *The Diary*, readers learn that Samuel is a womanizer. He often lusts after women, fantasizes about them, and harasses them. Through Samuel's interactions <https://assignbuster.com/gender-roles-love-and-marriage-in-seventeenth-century-england/>

with other women, readers gain an understanding of his perception of women as sexual objects and his disdain for his wife. Samuel's affair with Betty Michell most efficiently brings forth the idea that the adultery was founded on dissatisfaction with Elizabeth's inability to fulfill her wifely role. In his Diary, Pepys writes about a scandalous moment with Betty Michell while in the company of his wife: " I did come to sit ' avec' Betty Michell, and there had her ' main', which ' elle' did give me very frankly now, and did hazer whatever I ' voudrais avec la', which did ' plaisir' me ' grandement', and so set her at home with my mind mighty glad of what I have prevailed for so far" (2213). Writing in a sort of secret language, Pepys knew that he was doing something wrong when forcing himself on other women. This act of pursuing another woman while in the presence of his wife demonstrates Pepys's lack of satisfaction in his marriage.

Pepys's infatuation with Betty Michell continues to bring forth his underlying dissatisfaction with his wife. At one point in The Diary, shortly after forcing himself on Betty, he pretends that she is his wife. Pepys writes, " the mistresse of the shop took us into the kitchen and there talked and used us very prettily, and took her for my wife, which I owned and her big belly, and there very merry, till my thing done, and then took coach and home" (2219). It seems as though he is pleased with the idea of having a pregnant wife. This could reflect on his dissatisfaction with his wife's inability to bear him a child. The prevalent gender roles of the time dictated Pepys's actions. It was not uncommon for men to be rather forceful with women. Pepys would definitely be considered a pervert by today's standards, but treating women in such a vulgar manner was not necessarily wrong during Pepys's time. He

very much treats the women that he sees as objects of his desires; he judges their beauty and lusts over their appearances. He treats his wife, however, as a possession that he has control over, like a piece of property.

There is a definite difference between the way Pepys views the women that he lusts after and the woman that he is married to, but it is certainly not a difference in respect. In "The Irrepressible Pepys," author Brooke Allen asserts that "Pepys was a domestic bully" (19). Pepys writes about one particular instance of his physical abuse in his Diary. He writes, "Thereupon she giving me some cross answer I did strike her over her left eye such a blow as the poor wretch did cry out and was in great pain, but yet her spirit was such as to endeavour to bite and scratch me" (1479). Rather than being sexually abusive to his wife, as one might expect of such a lecher as Pepys, he is physically abusive. This exemplifies the concept of gender roles within marriage in the seventeenth century. Pepys finds women that he does not "own" to be sexually alluring, and he treats them as a forbidden fruit. His own wife, however, is viewed more as an object to gratify social status than as an object to gratify sexuality. For men of Pepys's time, "marriage marked the step from subjection within the household of father or master to rule within his own economic unit" (Peters 77). For women during this time period, at least through the lens of Pepys, marriage lowered their sex appeal and made them commodities. For Pepys, it seems as though marriage makes a woman lose her place on the pedestal. She loses her place as an object of desire, and she becomes an object that must be controlled, even if that means resorting to violence. Another instance in which Pepys acts out of anger toward his wife is when he breaks a basket that he had given her as a gift.

He writes, “ After that I went by water home, where I was angry with my wife for her things lying about, and in my passion kicked the little fine basket, which I bought her in Holland, and broke it, which troubled me after I had done it” (284). He feels the need to punish his wife, and this displays the inner-workings of their marriage. He is in control, and she must submit to her husband’s will.

On the subject of the structure of marriage in the seventeenth century, author of “ Marriage Contract and Social Contract in Seventeenth Century English Political Thought,” Mary Lyndon Shanley writes, “ The man’s role was that of head and governor, the woman’s role that of obedient follower” (79). While he admits to feeling guilty about the incident after the fact, the language that he uses to describe the incident leads readers to believe that he is sorrier about breaking the nice basket than he is the abuse that he has inflicted on his wife. He writes about the incident as though it was something that must be done. He had to punish his wife; that was his role. There are multiple times throughout The Diary that Pepys expresses guilt for his actions against his wife. Being fully aware that his affairs were admonished and his cruelty toward his wife was wrong, Pepys continues to live carelessly. He writes: In the afternoon telling my wife that I go to Deptford, I went, by water to Westminster Hall, and there finding Mrs. Lane, took her over to Lambeth, where we were lately, and there, did what I would with her, but only the main thing, which she; would not consent to, for which God be praised..... But, trust in the Lord, I shall never do so again while I live. After being tired with her company I landed her at White; Hall, and so home and at my office writing letters till 12 at night almost, and then home to supper and

bed, and there found my poor wife hard at work, which grieved my heart to see that I should abuse so good a wretch, and that is just with God to make her bad with me for my wrongin of her, but I do resolve never to do the like again. (1078) While Pepys may admit to feeling bad about his affair after it has happened, he never seems to feel bad while committing the act. He treats Elizabeth as almost a child or a pet. She is seen as something to be taken care of and felt sorry for, but she is not truly seen as an actual person with deep-rooted emotions. To Pepys, Elizabeth's emotions and reactions are very base because of societally-generated and accepted concepts of women. Pepys's guilt seems dishonest and selfish.

In conclusion, Samuel Pepys's Diary offers more to readers than the important historical information that it contains. Pepys's marriage to Elizabeth is heavily discussed in his Diary, and his writing offers readers with information about the confines of gender roles in seventeenth century middle class marriages. His numerous affairs and sexual abuse of women highlight the gender-bias that was prominent at the time. By examining the way that Pepys treats his wife in comparison to other women, readers learn of the difference between a woman and a wife. According to Pepys's actions, a woman is a sexual object, and a wife is a personal belonging. For Pepys, love was about lust, and marriage was about ownership.

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