When a Woman Hates Her Husband: Love, Sex and Fruitful Marriages in Early Modern England

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ABSTRACT

If spouses’ ‘hearts be not united in love’, their seed could not ‘unite to cause Conception’, the seventeenth-century astrologer-physician, Nicholas Culpeper noted. The authors of early modern medical and conduct texts argued that marital compatibility and harmony were necessary for a union to be fruitful. But where historians of sexuality have assumed that such exhortations spoke to the centrality of sexual pleasure, male and female, to conception, this article contends that having a happy and procreative marriage required far more than achieving a certain measure of enjoyment in sex. Working out whether a prospective spouse would be suitable was a complex process that took into account social, financial, emotional, bodily, religious and astrological similarities. Drawing on conduct manuals, childbearing guides, medical casebooks and the accounts of two unhappy wives, Anne Dormer and Sarah Cowper, this article shows that while the frameworks of compatibility and incompatibility in medical and conduct literature seemed to offer a way for talking about unavoidable and conscionable disagreements and childlessness, there was considerable pressure on women, rather than men, to overcome unhappiness and ensure fruitfulness.

The seventeenth-century astrologer-physician Nicholas Culpeper explained that there were multiple causes of childlessness. There might be male or female ‘impotency in conception’; the womb might be too narrow, so it was not ‘apt’ to ‘receive the Yard [penis] fitly’. Both husbands and wives had to ‘spend’ their seed, although precisely what this meant was sometimes ambiguous. Even if this seed was jointly emitted, it might be ‘unfruitful’ because one or both parties were unhealthy, or because there needed to be a ‘certain proportion’ between their seed and between their constitutions. The ‘occult qualities’ in seed could either ‘agree or disagree’. The 1656 edition of Culpeper’s Directory explained that their complexions might be too similar to be able to conceive a child, for it was the ‘universal course of Nature’ that contraries were like to increase. A third problem could be caused by the womb not ‘sucking’ the seed or not receiving it in a ‘right manner’. Culpeper termed this the ‘attractate faculty’, which, when impeded as a result of ‘distempers of the Womb’ or because a ‘woman hates her husband’, prevented male seed from reaching where it needed to be. Fourthly he noted that sometimes the womb was too ‘weak’ to retain the seed, even if it could or wanted to attract it. But this too had a close relationship to the tenor of the marriage.
If after sex, the woman ‘cough, [s]neeze, cry out, dance, or be angry, or frightened’ she might lose the seed; the action of the womb was intimately connected with a woman’s emotional state. She had to be cheerful to be procreative. There might also be a problem with the womb if it was too moist, too hot or too dry. Finally, if there was insufficient menstrual blood to nourish the infant in the womb, its life could not be sustained.\(^4\)

Culpeper’s vision of conception understood marital compatibility – bodily and emotional – as fundamental to fertility: ‘[I]f their hearts be not united in love, how should their Seed unite to cause Conception?’ This was why marriages arranged by parents against their children’s wishes were rarely productive. It was also why ‘there never comes Conception upon Rapes’.\(^5\) Not only would a poor match militate against generation, it would fail to be fruitful in a whole host of other ways, too – spouses would not live in harmony, they would be unhealthy, domestic management would be compromised and they would be distracted in devotion. Spouses’ bodies reflected the health and happiness of the union, and good marriage required considerable effort. Although husbands and wives had certain duties in marriage, Culpeper’s explanation points to the troubling idea that women alone, through their hate or mere lack of cheer, could make a marriage miserable, dysfunctional and childless. As Culpeper explained, women not only had to ensure the ‘meeting of their own seed’ but also had to ‘receive’ the man’s, ‘retain’ it and ‘nourish’ it before ‘afford[ing] it matter’ to form the child, carry it for the whole pregnancy and then deliver safely. This is why ‘barrenness is ofener from a fault in the woman than the men’. He concluded in men ‘there is nothing required but fruitful seed spent into a fruitful womb’.\(^6\) Wives’ minds, bodies and souls had to be committed to their husbands’ for the union to be successful.

Pleasure has dominated the histories of sexuality and fertility. Historians have concluded that until the eighteenth century, women’s sexual pleasure was a cultural, social and bodily priority because it was a prerequisite for conception. Thus, Thomas Laqueur famously concluded that whereas female orgasm was so ‘deeply embedded’ within early modern expectations of generation that its existence ‘was no more open to debate than was the warm, pleasurable glow that usually accompanies a good meal’, near the end of the eighteenth century, it was entirely expendable.\(^7\) Male and female bodies were ‘one-sex’ and anatomically similar, if not identical, differentiated only by their humours (men were hot and dry, and women cold and wet) and both women and men had to ejaculate, although childbearing guides of the period debated whether the male contribution was more powerful. But in the eighteenth century, Laqueur argued, a two-sex model emerged in which women no longer had to emit seed in order to conceive. While many have been sceptical of this ambitious thesis and its timeline, his contention that orgasm was central and indispensable to generation has remained unrevised, despite the fact that this term did not acquire its sexual connotations until the mid-eighteenth century and was not used in this context in childbearing guides of the period.\(^8\) Faramerz Dabhoiwala concludes that ‘women’s easy arousal was taken for granted’.\(^9\) Jennifer Evans’s account of the prodigious interest in aphrodisiacs in the period 1580–1780 indicates that efforts to combat childlessness were dominated by measures that sought to increase lust and sexual pleasure.\(^10\) This has also given rise to an idea that, in Angus McLaren’s terms, the ‘bed was one place in which men and women were more or less equal’.\(^11\)
that marriage ought to be loving and affectionate is assumed to be a subtle gesture to pleasure.

But while pleasure was intimately connected to the potential of conception in childbearing guides such as Culpeper’s – experiencing ‘extraordinary’ delight was one of the earliest signs of conception – being fertile was far more complicated and delicate than achieving a certain measure of enjoyment in sex.¹² Historians have too readily assumed an equivalence between early modern concern about the ‘sucking’ of the womb, for example, and modern cultural assumptions about sexual climax. Karen Harvey has noted that female orgasm was ‘not depicted clearly’ in eighteenth-century British erotica and that female sexuality and desire were ‘complex and not limited to female emission or orgasm’.¹³ Building on this work, this article suggests that being fertile was much broader and more profound than experiencing pleasure, but intimately connected to ideas of good, or fruitful, marriage. Taking a long frame, beginning with the burgeoning market in childbearing guides and domestic conduct books in the early decades of the seventeenth century and ending in the early eighteenth century, when Laqueur and others have proposed this shift occurred, highlights the ongoing importance of emotional, bodily, humoral, social, financial and religious compatibility in the ways people understood and wrote about fertility and the household. While conduct and medical authors at times noted that suitability was something that affected men and women equally, Culpeper’s explanation reveals the ways women’s bodies and minds were held disproportionately accountable for both the affective tone of a marriage and whether it was procreative.

A good match

The family was central to Protestant reformers’ visions of a new godly world, and considered a model of the state.¹⁴ Domestic authority enacted and displayed through a peaceful household was fundamental to male status more generally.¹⁵ Marriage was in the words of the ‘Homily on the State of Matrimony’, to ‘bring forth fruit’, to bридle the ‘corrupt inclinations of the Flesh’ and to provide a ‘perpetuall Friendship’. Good marriage involved living ‘peaceably and comfortably in Wedlock’, and tending to each other’s bodies and souls, something the burgeoning genre of household conduct guides sought to provide instruction in.¹⁶ Such texts were marketed to men and women embarking upon marriage, although, Ann Rosalind Jones has suggested that these practical marriage guides were more often written by men for other men.¹⁷ Owing to literacy levels and cost, they would have been purchased and read by middling and elite status individuals. Guidance often focused on the ways to manage a household of considerable means including governing and directing servants. Conduct authors were adamant that there was a ‘right way to preserve the honour of marriage unstained’ through ‘godly, loyall, and chaste’ conduct, and a wrong way that bred discontent, sin and disease.¹⁸ As the title of a popular published sermon, A Good Husband and a Good Wife Layd Open (1625) indicated, there were good spouses and bad ones.¹⁹ Because marriage was meant to ‘conserve and enlarge’ the Christian life, a poor match had profound consequences not just for the household, but could lead to a discordant state and church.²⁰

A poor match begot further misfortune and sin. The puritan Robert Snawsel outlined in his 1610 preface to readers, living in discontent was an ‘euill example to
others’ and led to the ‘losse of their credits, the wasting of their goods, the corrupting of their children and servants’ and importantly, to the ‘consuming of their owne bodies’.21 Robert Burton, author of The Anatomy of Melancholy (1621), described how when ‘good honest’ men were drawn to women who were dishonest, slothful and foolish ‘all goes to ruine’.22 Upon marriage, spouses became ‘one flesh’. William Gouge, a minister and the author of the very popular Of Domesticall Duties (1622), explained: ‘The husband in louing his wife loueth himselfe’ so that the benefits would ‘redound to himself, as to his wife’.23 John Dod and Robert Cleaver noted in A Godlie Forme of Householde Government (1612) that if spouses did not perform their marital duties ‘godly, carefully, and cheerfully on both sides’, life would become ‘lothesome and bitter, or rather more sharpe than death’.24

Ensuring one’s spouse was compatible was therefore treated with the utmost solemnity by conduct authors. ‘Equalitie’ in the match with regards to ‘Age, Estate, Condition, Pietie’ was very important.25 This was a decision early modern people did not make alone but in concert with a group of close acquaintances and family that advised and negotiated the match, often simply termed ‘friends’.26 Gouge outlined an ideal trajectory that would ensure life-long happiness in which both parties ‘manifested a mutuall liking to each other’, deliberated and took ‘aduice’ before being ‘thorowly settled in both their hearts of one another’ before the promise of marriage was made in front of witnesses. This would mean that ‘love is like to continue for ever’ which would be the ‘glue’ that would prevent the marriage from being broken, however much it may be ‘shaken up and downe’. He compared hasty marriage to trying to move two parts when the glue was moist – ‘they cannot remaine firme’.27 A Godlie Forme of Householde Government stressed that the promise of marriage had to be made voluntarily ‘because it must not come from the lippes alone, but from the wel-liking and consent of the heart’. The parents of prospective spouses ought to ensure that this was a genuine and freely-given promise and there was not any secret ‘loathing or abhorring’ between them.28 Thomas Gataker’s Marriage Duties (1620) cautioned men to ‘look ere they leape’ and deliberate long and with much advice, for it ‘cannot be vndone againe’.29 There was a fundamental tension in this vision of compatibility. On the one hand, ensuring one’s spouse was suitable relied on an assumption that different people would behave differently within partnerships, and yet, conduct literature simultaneously furthered a model of the family that universalised and furthered one ‘correct’ way of living as man and wife.

It was not necessary, Dod and Cleaver clarified, for there to be ‘a great measure of true, holy, and sanctified loue’ at first meeting, but there needed to be a little for it to ‘groweth little and little’ over the course of the marriage.30 When Lady Anne Halkett was being pursued by Thomas Howard in 1644, he reportedly told her: ‘[W]hat I love in you may well increase, butt I am sure itt can never decay.’31 The match fell through despite both professing their affections for one another because Halkett’s family forbade it. Both the Howards and the Halketts may have been gentry but they were cash-poor, and Thomas had been sent to France explicitly to find a ‘rich match’. The Halketts could not afford the ‘considerable portion’ Howard’s family demanded.32 While conduct authors acknowledged that it was important husbands and wives were of a similar social standing and brought comparable assets to the marriage, Anne and Thomas’ incompatibility came from precisely this kind of ‘equality’. For those lower
down the social scale this was also a concern. Steve Hindle has shown that churchwardens and overseers could and did step in to halt some matches when there was fear they would become a burden upon the parish through financial insolvency.\textsuperscript{33} At other times, a difference in social status and wealth could break a match; Elizabeth Freke forbade her son from marrying the woman he loved because the woman was of ‘too much’ ‘Quality’ for their family and Freke did not want to be ‘a servant to any one In my Old Age’.\textsuperscript{34} Religious factionalism within seventeenth-century Rye provoked Samuel Jeakes senior and Frances Hartridge to draw up a contract that promised her the right to worship as her conscience saw fit and to be allowed to journey to the church ‘whereof I am a Member fower times in the yeare’ after their marriage.\textsuperscript{35}

Sorting through these categories of suitability – love, money, religiosity and the judgements of friends and family – was sometimes tricky. Astrology provided a tool for many to work out whether a potential spouse might suit. The astrologer-physicians Simon Forman and Richard Napier were consulted by individuals eager to divine whether someone was a ‘good match’. Elizabeth Turner, for example, asked whether she should or would marry William Muskott, and was told to ‘Let him yet go’.\textsuperscript{36} Allis Jones inquired whether it ‘would be best to have’ Richard Thoroughgood ‘for money or Love’.\textsuperscript{37} Napier’s servant, Elizabeth Nichols, asked his professional advice about whether she should follow the hopes of her father, mother and grandfather and marry John Chivoll even though she did not love him.\textsuperscript{38} There might be important signs of astrological incompatibility in the lead up to the contract, The Ten Pleasures of Marriage (1688), a satire of seventeenth-century middling sort life-cycle, suggested. The author, A. Marsh, asked the couple to consider why ‘when you were going to sign the Contract of marriage’ they ‘alter’d so mightily, & that your hand shook so?’ Marsh protested that although he was no expert on astrology ‘yet nevertheless me-thought it was none of the best signs; and that one might already begin to make a strange Prognostication from it’. These bad events would be ‘more certain’ than anything the famous astrologer William Lilly or other almanac compilers ‘ever writ’, he joked.\textsuperscript{39}

For staunch Protestants, events in the lead up to marriage indicated divine approval or disapproval of the match. Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century diarists often found providential meaning in the weather, their bodies or the thoughts of friends in advance of their weddings, that communicated whether a particular match would be happy and fruitful. Elizabeth Freke lamented in her meditations that she had wilfully ignored the protestations of her ‘frinds’ and family not to marry Percy, her cousin. They wed in secret in 1672, a ‘disobedience’ which she thought merited the unhappy marriage that God inflicted upon her. They married again seven months later, this time with her father’s approval. On both her wedding days it rained heavily, something she recorded were ‘dredfull emblems to me’ and future ‘misfortunes prognosticated’. Freke’s exploration of her courtship and wedding to Percy reveal the tensions in early modern ideas of compatibility. Although she noted that there had been considerable ‘affection’ between the two before they wed, this had caused her to wilfully ignore, what was in her later opinion the more portentous sign: the disapproval of her family and friends. The day after their wedding, Percy Freke challenged Lord Roscomon in St James’s Park to fight him or cancel a loan of a £1000. Elizabeth woke the next morning to find her new husband in Whitehall and a £1000 poorer.\textsuperscript{41} This was the beginning of
a difficult and financially ruinous marriage. She attributed these troubles to the two miscarriages she had in the early years of marriage.

Alice Wandesford similarly found signs of incompatibility in her 1651 courtship and wedding to William Thornton, although later revised this judgement in her meditations. On her wedding day, despite having been in 'health & strength for many yeares before' she 'fell soodainly soe ill & sicke' that she and those close to her thought she might die. These were not the first signs of potential divine disapproval of the match. The negotiations were long and torturous so much so that her husband-to-be had fallen into 'much sadnesse & discontent' which she explained ‘hasten[ed]’ the onset of an ague. While in the days and months surrounding her wedding she might have fretted that they were not suitable, she later reflected that God had been trying to refocus her ‘desires’ and ‘loue’ upon Him, rather than on the ‘comforts of a louing husband’. The ideal of instant love between courting couples was at once undermined and placed into conflict with expectations that husbands and wives could love no one more than they loved God. Indeed, some marriages might be too happy or too procreative to fit the ideal of godly union. Thus, Mary Whitelocke, in her instructions to her son Samuel, explained that her first marriage to Rowland Wilson MP in 1634 had been childless because if they had had a baby they would have been ‘surfetted with to[o] much creature injoyments’ and forgotten their devotion to God. Dorothy Shawe likewise fretted that she and her husband did ‘too much love one another’ which took away from their devotion. Spousal love that was godly was thus narrowly defined and being truly compatible meant that spouses could only hold affection for each other as far as it never impacted on their performance of piety and devotion. Being well matched was paramount to having a good marriage: one that produced children, was harmonious and facilitated devotion.

**Being fruitful**

Choosing the correct spouse was represented as the remedy for all manner of disorderly domestic behaviours, but it also necessary to fulfill the key purpose of marriage: generation. Thus, *The Ladies Dictionary* (1694) lamented how many times procreation was ‘frustrated by unsuitable Matrimony’ and that ‘regard ought to be had to the Complexions and Consticutions of the Parties that marry’ to ascertain ‘how nearly they are corresponding and agreeing’. Gouge stressed that equality of age was particularly important for ensuring that spouses’ bodies were compatible enough to be procreative, which he reminded readers was what marriage had been intended for anyway. Affection and love were central to both fertility and health more generally. Queen Mary reportedly told a delegation that had encouraged her to marry that ‘if she were married against her will she would not live three months’ and if she survived, would certainly not have any children. When Queen Elizabeth was similarly pressured to wed, a correspondent noted that she should be given free rein to choose a spouse for herself ‘wyych shalbe the nerest wayes with the helpe of God to bring us a blessed prynce’. Frances Hulse, a goldsmith’s wife, who had been married five years, asked Napier whether she would have children and what her fortune would be in 1603. The chart showed that she ‘Loves besides her husband’ and she ‘little regards’ him – this was why they would not have any children. Ann Timcock similarly asked about having children and was told that ‘her husband & nature doth not Agree with her’ so she would only have a
baby by ‘some other man and not by her husband’. Susan Sanders asked whether she would have any more children and any more husbands. She hoped she might ‘Live to enjoy him that Doth best Deserve her’. The verdict was that her husband would die, she would live to marry the man she really loved and they would have two children, a boy and a girl. Patricia Crawford has taken the comments of Queen Mary and Elizabeth, and other such evidence, to be an indication of the centrality of orgasm to conception, and the agency that this might give women in marriage negotiations. More than reflecting merely an interest in orgasm or sexual pleasure, these accounts of matching potential spouses reveals that spiritual, emotional and bodily affinity was deemed central to positive marital outcomes, of which conceiving and bearing a child was a critical factor and index. Good matches would be fruitful in all manner of ways.

One reason that procreation was intimately linked to love and happiness was because the passions of the soul, or emotions, were one of the six non-naturals, alongside air, food and drink, excretions, sleep, movement and rest, that determined health. Grief, anger, sadness, fear or joy could all produce bodily responses. Olivia Weisser, for example, has found that distress brought about by the death of a family member or slanderous gossip could directly cause illness. The restoration of health after childbirth could similarly be stymied by anguish. Bad marriage could waste spouses’ health to death. Mary Whitelocke warned her son that being ‘unequally yoked’ in marriage would make his life not only ‘very uncomfortable’ but very short because ‘sickness will put an end to it’. He ought not to let his wife get too ‘merry’ because this would lead to ‘lightness and malencoly’, which would make him become sympathetically ill. Mary herself had ignored the worries of her ‘freinds’ that were vehemently against her second marriage because they worried she would ‘loose much of my earthly contentment’ and thereby endanger her health. While her first husband refused to stay a night in their home without her, her second husband, Bulstrode Whitelocke, was more of a serious unaffectionate man. In this way the bodily health of spouses mirrored and displayed the health of the marriage.

Historians have pointed to the myriad of ways that frightening sights might impress upon the unborn child in medieval and early modern Europe, often termed ‘maternal imagination’. Unfulfilled cravings might leave babies with birth marks. Looking at portraits of black men during conception might alter the race of an unborn child, and gazing upon those with ‘disfigurements’ might lead to sympathetic impediments. For early modern people being fertile meant not only getting pregnant but also staying pregnant and bringing a healthy child to term. Historians have perhaps been less attentive to the ways in which women’s everyday emotional experiences might impact upon their ability to bring a healthy child to term. As the author of Every Woman Her Own Midwife (1675) explained, women who were pregnant or wishing to conceive should avoid ‘watching, mourning, sadnesse, anger, and all other perturbations’. Culpeper hoped women would lead ‘contented lives, that so their conception may be well formed’. Correspondence with pregnant women often stressed the importance of being happy to their ability to bear a healthy baby. Anna Temple warned her pregnant daughter that if she were not more ‘chear full’ she would miscarry like she had previously. Isaac Archer attributed his wife’s two miscarriages in 1676/7, once in April and again in August, to emotional causes. The first was because of ‘her griefe and ilnes’, and the
second ‘through a sodaine fright, upon an unhappy occasion’. Margaret, Countess of Wemyss, intreated her pregnant daughter in 1685 to be ‘wise and kinde to the childe in y[ou]r belly’ and to ‘be merry’ and not to let anything ‘disquiet & vex you’. Early in 1667, Robert Boyle’s, 1st Earl of Orrery, and his wife, Mary’s, newborn son died. She was grief-stricken by the ‘greate losse’ and for two days afterwards could not eat, drink or sleep. Her husband was dismayed that ‘as long as she liues this malletlinclly sorte of Life, she will neaver be w[i]th Child’. If she did manage to get pregnant he did not think the child would survive. When her father asked in May whether she was ‘breeding’, her husband replied that she was not, but had gone to visit relatives and ‘she begins to grow fatter & bee a little merrier’. Women were not just encouraged to keep their spirits up in order to further the procreative wishes of their husbands and family members, but held accountable for these emotional and bodily failures. While early modern ideas about marital compatibility appeared to offer a framework for talking about unavoidable and conscionable disagreements and childlessness – spouses were just not suited to one another – women were often expected to overcome any instability of mood in order to regulate their bodies.

Women were sometimes assumed to have the control to will their minds and bodies to get pregnant. When Thomas Wentworth, 1st Earl of Strafford, wrote to his brother-in-law, most probably John Holles, in 1627 worrying that recent conflicts – most likely with Spain and France – had depleted the army, the solution was in ensuring women applied themselves to getting pregnant. He hoped ‘it will make our wuies instead of bearing wenches, w[hi]ch of late you say thei haue bene much giuen to, fall to bringing of boyes yong soldiers’. He knew ‘no reason but mine should begin’ as his wife had already conceived once, ‘for if she does not, at her perill’. Not only were their wives held accountable for conceiving but the future of the family and the safety of the realm. He told Holles that once he got his wife pregnant, he hoped his sister ‘shall see how mine is serued, I hope she will take faire warning, & doe as she should doe’. He sincerely hoped that Wentworth’s wife, Arabella, would be ‘a joyfull & good mother’ – these two things were inextricably bound.

As well as being cheerful, women had to fulfil their marital debt through having sex regularly. The Honourable State of Matrimony Made Comfortable (1685) outlined that couples had to ‘Take much delight in the love, company and converse of each other’, suggesting that love and affection were acts of choice within marriage and the fulfilment of a duty. Particularly important was preserving ‘conjugal love to each other’, or sex. Neglecting to perform these duties ‘breeds a contempt of each other, as it may be a means of provoking each other to sin’.

Having sex, however, could be difficult when women harboured resentment to their husbands. The mother of Catherine Ignoram sought the help of Richard Napier in 1633 because she had been married three years and would ‘not permit her husband to have use of her body’ although she was ‘willing to lie with him’. She never ‘desyres carnal copulation’ and felt a ‘yucking up of her meat & is as one tormentted’. She felt as if she were choking and was unable to speak or open her mouth. Her only source of relief was when she and her husband prayed. Elisabeth Polter of Willingham, twenty-five, ‘denyeth her husb[and] the vse of her body’. For these women it was not just physically impossible for them to experience the pleasure which would make conception more likely, but to even submit to having sex. In such cases their bodies experienced
and displayed the emotional disorder of their marriages. The published account of Robert Devereux and Frances Howard’s notorious 1613 annulment reported that the archbishop had attributed their inability to consummate their marriage to ‘Want of Love, which restraineth all Motions of carnal Concupiscence’ and opposed the judgement assuming that if the couple could rekindle their romance, all would be well.73

The exact nature of the problem is unclear, although it was debated at length. On one occasion he described ‘labour[ing] a quarter of an Hour carnally to know’ Frances but she had called him ‘Cow, and Coward, and Beast’. She claimed she had ‘offer’d her self, and her Body’ but had been rebuffed.74 Central to her claim that she had done no wrong was that she had submitted to his attempts – that her body and mind were committed to wifely marital duties.

Sarah Cowper notably took a vow of celibacy after her fourth child was born when she was twenty-six. She proudly figured herself in her diary as a ‘Mirrour of Chastity, Even beyond the most intact virgin’ because she had conceived four children ‘without knowing what it was to have an unchast[e] thought or Sensual pleasure’.75 Cowper was flagrantly disobeying conduct authors’ advice of the necessity of conjugal affection to marriage. As Anne Kugler notes, she reinterpreted the calls for chastity in marriage in such texts to absolute abstinence and represented herself as the godliest of wives.76

This was a source of conflict with her husband who claimed that ‘whoring’ was a lesser sin than a ‘Chast[e] Woman that overvalued herself’.77 The desperately unhappy Anne Dormer continually sought to sleep in a different room from her husband. Like those women in the casebooks, she claimed her marital bed would literally kill her – it was too hot and made her physically ill.78 As Sasha Handley has noted, being content and comforted was a prerequisite for a good night’s sleep in early modern England. Disrupted sleep jeopardised health further.79

But if one married poorly, conduct authors expected that incompatibility could be overcome through effort and will. Gataker made this explicit when he addressed those who had already ‘ouershot themselues’ by choosing an unsuitable spouse and told them that they must ‘now striue even to enforce their affections’ and crave instruction from God so they might be able to ‘bring themselues to that disposition that God now requireth of them’. Those who were ‘free’, or in other words not married, could frame their choice of spouse to their ‘mind’, but ‘he that hath chosen must frame his heart to his choise’ and his ‘affection to his action’.80 Cleaver and Dod told men who had matched with women who were ‘froward, wayward’ that they might ‘little and little’ take the ‘noysome weeds out of her minde’.81 The ‘Homily on the State of Matrimony’ commanded spouses to ‘apply their minds’ and ask for the help of God ‘so to rule their hearts, and to knit their minds together’ as a remedy for any ‘diuision of discord’.82 But all too often prescriptive literature assumed it would be women that would do this work to reform the minds and bodies of their husbands and overcome the burden of incompatibility. Although their benevolence to each other ought to be ‘mutuall’, from the outset, men’s efforts to maintain marital harmony were static. In Dod and Cleaver’s explanation, men ‘get goods’ and ‘get monie and prouision’, but wives had to ‘gather them together, and saue them’, to ‘keep the house’, to ‘giue account of all’ and ‘ouersee and giue order for all things within the house’.83 A husband’s first duty, conduct authors concurred, was to love his wife, and secondly to ‘instruct’ in Gouge’s terms or ‘gouern her’ in Dod and Cleaver’s – but the effort was disproportionately hers.84

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This contradiction is apparent in Robert Snawsdel’s *A Looking Glasse for Married Folkes* (1610) which ventriloquised the voices of four women. Xantip expressed regret at having chosen her lacklustre husband, but Eulalie scolded her that she had ‘no liberty to change him for another’ and could not ‘cast him off’. If he was a bad husband, she must be a poor wife for ‘wee wiuues may do much in either making or marring our husbands’ – if she were cheerful and submissive, their marriage would be harmonious. As a parable she relayed how a neighbour beat his wife, a woman of ‘singular good carriage, and excellent behauiour’. Her continued refusal to tell neighbours and friends about his violence eventually won him over and broke his ‘stout heart’ and he never beat her again. Discretion, submission and forbearing could all mend a seemingly incompatible marriage, even one that was violent. In ballads too, wives were blamed for provoking their husbands to violence. A 1616, ballad warned women that criticising their husbands could lead to murder. When Anne Wallen was struck by her husband, her habit of criticising him was so ingrained that she retaliated and stabbed him. He was blameless – ‘He nere did wrong to any in his life’ and was continually ‘wronged by his wife’ through her railing and complaining. A woodcut of her burning at the stake emphasised the penalties for openly dissatisfied wives. Similarly, *A Warning for Bad Wives* (1678) told of a couple who had been married several years but lived with ‘much Discord and frequent Wrangling’. She similarly was judged to have ‘provoked her Husband to be more violent and cruel to her’ which ended in a fatal quarrel. Once interred and awaiting execution, she reflected that other women ought to take more pains ‘to live in Love and Peace with their Husbands if it be possible’. Submitting to the authority of one’s husband lovingly was the recipe for a quiet and fruitful marriage.

In potentially incompatible marriages, religious pamphlets suggested that wives ought to counsel their husbands affectionately and gently into better behaviour. Mary Bewley was ‘kind and loving to her husband, solicitous for his health’, a ‘wise manager’ and she ‘seasonably and discreetly’ admonished her husband. She took on the task of ‘comforting and chearing him up’ that it was to her ‘own prejudice’ emotionally and bodily. The wife of Wessell Goodwin suffered her extravagant and indulgent husband by ‘finely divert[ing]’ him from ‘his follies’, but later in their marriage ‘his folly would admit of no restraint’ and their ‘good correspondency of affection’ was in jeopardy. His ‘vertous wife’ at ‘last sunke under’ and ‘fell sick of a painfull disease contracted by melancholy’. The cause is apparent to the reader, but the author will not disclose the ‘private unkindness with which she long strugled’, nor will the ever discreet Ellenor share the conduct of her husband which ‘hath been so much affliction in my life’. His insistence on continually playing music is the eventual death of her. Such texts furthered a stereotype that it was within the power of wives alone to overcome any marital difficulties to ensure spouses lived happily ever after. Illness and bodily disorder that came about as a result was just another ‘snare’ to be borne patiently. The clergyman Philip Henry was called on by a young woman’s father to advise the way forward in a fractured marriage in 1672. There had been ‘some unkindness growing between them’ and they had been living apart for a year. She complained of ‘sin & want of reassurance’ in her husband. His answer was simply to ‘rectify the former matter’ and return to him, despite the misgivings of her ‘Friends’. He thanked God for his own ‘conjugal comforts, marry’d neer twelve yeares & never yet reconcil

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bec[ause] no need of ‘t’.\textsuperscript{92} Even when wives were not the immediate source of marital conflict, they were held responsible for not mollifying their husbands suitably.

**Unfruitful marriages**

The association of unhappy marriage with sin and ungodly conduct, combined with the invective that spouses had to labour to live in peace, created a cultural tension which meant few early modern people recorded marital conflict in diaries, letters and other paperwork. Acknowledging discord was even more problematic for women who had to navigate the boundary between gently admonishing the impious conduct of husbands and always submitting to their authority. Despite this, two women, Anne Dormer (c.1648–95) and Sarah Cowper (1644–1720) wrote extensively about their incompatible and difficult marriages, whilst simultaneously grappling with a prevailing cultural framework which saw wives as responsible for the emotional tenor of the household.

Anne Dormer (née Cottrell) wrote to her sister about the ‘insupportable tyranny’ of her marriage to Robert Dormer, a Buckinghamshire widow twenty years her senior in the 1690s.\textsuperscript{93} Her unhappiness kept her from sleeping and she struggled to eat, at one point describing herself as a ‘weak shattred car-case [carcass] broken with restless nights and unquiett days’. She vowed periodically to ‘keeepe a cheerfull contented mind’ and consider her husband’s behaviour as no more than ‘changes in the weather’.\textsuperscript{94} Her sister’s replies unfortunately do not survive. Anne’s letters expose the paradox of early modern frameworks of marital compatibility: that some marriages were doomed to be miserable and unhealthy, but that women were often held responsible for the personal failure of their minds and bodies. Anne hinted at her longstanding reservations about the match when she told her sister she had long ‘expected’ in ‘vaine’ that her husband would change but he was ‘the same to a tittle he ever was’, and now she had to accept her ‘portion in this life’.\textsuperscript{95} But although Anne constantly professed to submit to this treatment and play the role of submissive and gently admonishing wife – she ‘settled into that way which will make M[rr] D humores the most supportable for me’ and would venture no further than her garden so as not to aggravate him – this was exceedingly difficult and her illness and sadness only served to irritate Robert further.\textsuperscript{96} He called her the ‘most abject pittyfull creature in the world’ and admonished her that ‘as one values themselves they shall be valued’ by others. Slyly she told her sister that that could not be true ‘for I know none values him as he values himself’.\textsuperscript{97} In one argument she told him that if all husbands acted the way he had no woman would ever ‘venture upon Marriage’. ‘Mr D was made for an ill wife.’ Had he been matched with one who ‘needed his severitie’, ‘governing and crossing’ he would have been ‘in his element’.\textsuperscript{98} Even a ‘poore woman that lives in a thatched house when she is ill, or weary of her work’ could seek succour from her neighbours.\textsuperscript{99} Robert not only neglected to tend to Anne’s bodily and emotional health himself, but isolated her from those who might do so in his place.

Once trapped in a marriage that was obviously incompatible, Anne struggled to reconcile her desire to be, or perhaps be seen as, a model godly wife who submitted silently to her husband’s governance with the constant goading and baiting that Robert inflicted upon her. Reading her sister’s letters and replying was the only source of ‘comfort’ and kept her death at bay. Her body and its ailments were both proof of
how poor the match was, and a way in which she could communicate her commitment to domestic piety. She juxtaposed her wasting away with Robert’s indulgence of his own ‘fancy’ in ‘frying broiling resting stewing and preserving’ of fruit. Such comments were not merely a criticism of his vanity and selfishness but gestured to his failure to fulfil his duties as a husband – a damning claim. This becomes even more stark in an episode she relayed to her sister about one night when Robert was unwell. Anne ‘satt up by him till morning’ nursing him through his vomiting fits, despite the fact that she was so influenced by his condition she began to become ill herself in sympathy. ‘It seems then I kissed him as I held his head’, which the next day Robert used to mock and deride her for her normal lack of affection. While Robert appeared completely unfazed by what she perceived as her often near-fatal condition, and did nothing to alleviate it, insisting that she slept in the bedroom with him, Anne depicted herself as labouring to overcome their incompatibility at the expense of her own health.

Sarah Cowper’s ‘Domestic grievances’ with William Cowper left her ‘Indispos’d in Body’ and disrupted her sleep. Sarah, like Anne, was unequivocal about their incompatibility: ‘Never two more Averse than we in Humour, Passions, and Affections our Reason and Sense Religion or Morals agree not,’ a reflection which has more than a passing similarity to the categories of affinity forwarded in conduct manuals for selecting a spouse. In 1702, she reflected that she had lived with him ‘almost 1400 daies’ and not one had passed without her needing to forgive him. A particular source of conflict was their going to Hertford for the summer. She wrote in 1702 that the last three summers ‘lay heavy on mee, but I forc’d my Self to endure, while I thought I might serve his interest to be a Member of parliament’. Now his obligations had ended, she informed him that she would not be following him owing to her poor health. During her absence that summer, William wrote to tell her that he was ‘melancholy’ without her though he could not wish her with him ‘because nothing can be so prejudiciall to thy health, as sadness’. He encouraged her to ‘submit to God, and (let me add) be as chearfull as your condition will permit’ which would be the only route to restoring her health, and mending the ‘unlucky circumstances of my Family’.

Women in Forman and Napier’s casebooks similarly gestured to difficult relations as the source of poor health. Goody Kirby, forty-eight, for example, reunited with her husband with whom she had been estranged for fifteen years for ‘2 nights & 2 days’ at the Newport Fair in 1633. When she ‘came home the white ones passed downe continually’, a genital discharge, and she could not ‘rest at night for greefe & thought of’ her marriage. Joan Hull, forty-six, took ‘a greefe touching her first husband’ because they ‘could not agree’ and he had ‘Used her not well & was lordly given & always sold away all & made her after she had a child to go 7 years to service againe. many hartes greefe.’ In court cases, too, women were described as falling ill in response to cruel treatment by their husbands. Somerset justices ruled in 1623 that Anne Flannain’s illness had been triggered by her husband’s cruelty. Although these interactions did not always explicitly reference fertility, they clearly show the ways in which marital discord had direct bodily impacts for these women, preventing conception.
Having missed or been denied an opportunity to marry a more suitable spouse was commonly proffered as a cause of grief and continuing poor health. Elizabeth Church, forty-six, was not able to marry ‘one that she had loved long & agoe’ and was now wed to a husband who beat her in 1621. She vomited anything she ate, could not sleep and was ‘somewhat wild & feeles not the ground on which she goes’. Satan came to her in the ‘likeneses of a cat’ and tempted her to kill herself. Elizabeth Seer consulted Richard Napier in 1608 and 1611 because she had taken ‘grief touching one that she loves’. She had ‘been matched once or twice’ but her father hindered it. Mary Key, twenty-nine, was pained in her heart, short winded and her body swelled because she was dissuaded from marrying the man she loved by her mistress in 1601. At times, the bodily effects of a bad marriage were direct and immediate, when husbands beat their wives. Church was beaten by her husband who was thirty-four years her senior, and she was vexed ‘for one that she loved long agoe’; these double snares sat side by side. Marital violence was something that was perceived as occasionally a necessary measure by husbands seeking to correct wayward wives. Courts had to sort through the narratives of husbands, wives and witnesses to determine whether force or coercion was deemed appropriate, or unreasonable. Elizabeth Foyster suggests that the fluidity of the definition of cruelty, which did not always distinguish between direct and indirect bodily harm through emotional viciousness, could at times be used by women to their advantage in courts, provided they might be able to show themselves meek and discreet in the face of this treatment.

The imperative of wifely submission meant that these women in unhappy marriages stressed their silence and passivity in the face of torment. Dormer told her sister that her ‘vowe of living with him [her husband] till death us do part make me resolve to endure anything rather then leave him if he will lett me live with him’. Cowper was keen to note that when she told William she would not be joining him in Hertford it was the ‘first time (I may truly Say) that ever I design’d to Contradict his Will’. Both Dormer and Cowper had ceased having children when they wrote their accounts of incompatible matches, in Cowper’s case entirely consciously. But even if they had been of an age where they could get pregnant, their ravaged, depleted bodies could never have conceived in an early modern mind. Their accounts show the ways that bodily health was carefully intertwined with marital harmony in early modern England. Far from being fruitful, the bodies of women in discordant matches, rejected their husbands and their wifely role, including childbearing, through wasting, weakness, choking, sleeplessness and vomiting.

Conclusions

Mary Astell, author of Reflections upon Marriage (1706), summarised the lot of the unhappy early modern woman when she said that while husbands might escape a wayward wife, ‘neither Prudence nor Duty will allow a Wife to fly out: her Business and Entertainment are all at home and though he make it never So uneasie to her, She must be Content and make her best on’.

There was considerable pressure on women not only to be ‘Content’ in Astell’s terms but also to ensure others in the household were, too. Goodness begot further goodness. Happy spouses would accrue further credits and joys. And yet there was a conflicting and equally powerful early modern cultural script that held women disproportionately accountable for domestic harmony. Discord,
childlessness or domestic disorder might all be blamed on the unwillingness of a wife to commit her mind, body and soul to her marital duties. It was not enough to tend to the domestic and bodily needs of her husband and other household members. She had to do so cheerfully.

This suggests yet another way in which the mind and body were messily intertwined in early modern England. The accounts of women in unhappy marriages open up a world in which health was profoundly social. Bodies reflected and displayed the emotional and physical wellbeing of other family members. Gesturing to bodily disorder may have been a way for women to express dissatisfaction and unhappiness, whilst simultaneously not wanting to be seen as criticising their husbands. The women who consulted the astrologers often represented their bodies rejecting their husbands against their will. There are parallels between such narratives and those of female nervousness in the nineteenth century, a phenomenon that has been interpreted by some historians as a way some women consciously or unconsciously sought to escape marital duties. As in the later period, early modern women who claimed that their health suffered as a result of their marriages, were suspected of feigning these symptoms. The Dictionary for the Fair Sex (1694) told husbands not to ‘Regard’ women’s tears. Women had more ‘stratagems’ than the general of an army and would do anything to bring about their ‘Plots and Projects’. The Ten Pleasures of Marriage joked that the bride looked forward to her husband being her ‘Doctor’ and curing ‘all other dis-tempers whatsoever’, whilst he was in the ‘stocks’, a clear inversion of the expectation women would sacrifice their bodies and wellbeing for their families through childbearing, caring, housework and devotion. The popular genre of ballads about cuckolded men played on an idea that marriage could take a bodily toll on men. These wives scolded and were profligate, the inverse of the godly wives that Dormer and Cowper sought to represent themselves as. In The Batchelors Delight the husband worked all day and then was forced to rock the cradle and feed the baby, exhausting him and damaging his health. Marriage ‘sometim[e] doth in love begin’ but it all too often ended in ‘loathing’. As Foyster has noted of eighteenth-century court cases, women who spoke about their bodies in narratives of marital incompatibility and violence did not see this as an escape route. Indeed, Cowper and Dormer worked hard in their writings to fashion themselves a godly and wifely identity despite their inability to live peacefully and lovingly. Just because this may have been a cultural script, this did not mean it did not also describe the ways women understood and experienced their bodies in relation to their marriage.

Just as Culpeper stressed women had to labour to meet the man’s seed, retain it, nourish it and afford it further matter, before carrying it cheerfully for the whole pregnancy and delivering it safely in order to have a healthy baby, conduct authors also expected women to gather, save, keep, oversee and give account for ‘all things within the house’ in order to have a healthy marriage. This article has suggested the ways in which fertility in early modern England might be an even broader category than historians have allowed for. Not only did spouses have to be healthy and find pleasure in sex to be fruitful but their minds, bodies and souls had to consent and commit to the union and its perpetuation too. When a woman hated her husband, a marriage could never be fruitful.
Acknowledgements

Early versions of this paper were presented at both the University of Melbourne and the North American Conference on British Studies in Vancouver. Thanks to audience members for their comments, particularly Jenny Spinks, Una McIlvenna, Tim Parkin, Karen Harvey and Lisa Forman Cody. A special thanks to Lauren Kassell, Boyd Brogan, Christoffer Basse, Pippa Carter, Silvia De Renzi, Carolin Schmitz, Jessica Hamel-Akré and other colleagues at Cambridge for reading and commenting on this paper. I am extremely grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their many helpful comments and suggestions, and to the editors of the special issue, Zubin Mistry and Rosemary Elliot.

Funding information

This work was supported by the Wellcome Trust [grant number 205359/Z/16/Z]

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117. Cowper, ‘Diary’, 16 June 1702, p. 230.
118. Mary Astell, Reflections upon Marriage (London, 1706), pp. 30–1.
119. Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, ‘The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Role Conflict in Nineteenth-Century America’, Social Research 39 (1972), pp. 652–78; Elaine Showalter, The Female Malady: Woman, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980 (London, 1987).
120. Foyster notes that there was ‘always an underlying suspicion [in the eighteenth century] that women could sham illness’; Foyster, Marital Violence, p. 125.
121. Dunton, Ladies Dictionary, p. 382.
122. Marsh, Ten Pleasures of Marriage, pp. 24–5.
123. *The Batchelors Delight, Being a pleasant new Song, shewing the happiness of a single life, and the mis-
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