

WEDDING TRADITIONS

in the MIDDLE AGES and the RENAISSANCE



*Shakespeare drew from both Middle Ages and Renaissance wedding customs when he wrote **Romeo and Juliet**. Here are some common wedding traditions from both time periods.*

- ◆ Diamond rings became popular between 1200 and 1400. Italians believed that diamonds were created from the flames of love.
- ◆ Brides began to carry bouquets and toss them to the guests in the 1300s. Prior to that, it was popular for the bride to toss her garter to the men, reenacting how a lady would toss her ribbon or colors to her knight. However, sometimes drunken guests got out of control and tried to remove the garter ahead of time. To avoid this situation, brides switched to tossing flowers.
- ◆ English newlyweds between 1300 and 1650 would pile small cakes as high as they could. Then the couple would lean over and try to kiss without knocking down the pile of sweets. If the couple succeeded, they would share a lifetime of prosperity.
- ◆ Between 1300 and 1650, weddings of powerful noble families could last up to a week. During that time, the guests would eat, sleep, and be entertained at the expense of the bridal families.
- ◆ In the 1300s, brides favored blue, red, peach, orange, tan, and white for festive colors. They often chose blue or yellow for their garters or for flowers tucked in their hair. Thus the tradition of “something blue” began.
- ◆ Weddings in the 1400s often featured a living centerpiece, made of pastry and filled with 24 live blackbirds. As part of the wedding celebration, the birds would be released. The nursery rhyme of “four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie” originated from this custom.

FORTUNE'S FOOL

For centuries, the goddess Fortuna has been considered unpredictable. During the Middle Ages, writers tried to reconcile the pagan idea of Fortune with their Christian faith. Eventually, Fortune's workings were seen as an instrument of God's will.

The workings of God's will were also seen in the natural order. For example, after the death of a king, there might be a natural disaster. Those who violated the natural order were believed to meet with misfortune.

Shakespeare's tragedies, including *Romeo and Juliet*, reflect these Elizabethan ideas.

In act 3, scene 1, line 137, Romeo calls out, “I am

Fortune's fool.” In the prologue, the lovers are referred to as

“star-crossed.” (The Elizabethans believed that star-crossed people were born under unlucky stars.) Shakespeare made Fortune a significant force in the lovers' tragedy.



Although Romeo and Juliet are fictional characters, their lives reflect the customs and norms of Italy in the 1200–1400s. The following is a comparison of how a female, we'll call her Juliet, and a male, we'll call him Romeo, differ in equality and treatment.

Juliet

A typical woman in Juliet's time would likely be married at age 15.

Juliet would be escorted and watched at social events.

It was expected that Juliet's family would provide a dowry (money and material items) to her groom.

Juliet was expected to be chaste until her wedding night, and from then on to be completely faithful to her husband.

It was not acceptable for Juliet to handle weapons, play tennis, wrestle, or do other things that involved physical exercise.

Juliet may have had a tutor come to her home, but she would never be allowed into a university. Instead, she would spend her day spinning, weaving, embroidering, and learning social graces, such as dancing.

A servant would spend hours each day helping Juliet fix her hair, get dressed, and put on makeup.

The only option to marriage would have been the convent. Juliet was expected to marry and bear children, to run a household, and to graciously entertain guests.

It would not be typical for a woman like Juliet to participate in city or political affairs.

Juliet would be advised to obey and honor her husband.

Juliet would have had very little say in decisions concerning her children.

Romeo

A typical man in Romeo's time would marry no sooner than age 21.

Romeo would be allowed freedom to drink and carouse as he pleased.

Romeo would control all his wife's possessions, money, and property.

Romeo would have been allowed to visit prostitutes, even after he was married.

Romeo was expected to learn how to fence, fight, play athletic games, and do other physical activities.

Romeo would have attended school with other young men in a student's home. He could have gone to a university.

Romeo dressed and groomed himself. Servants would do the laundry, put clothes away, and make the bed.

Romeo could have been a politician, merchant, soldier, sea captain, artist, doctor, banker, scholar, or religious man.

It would have been advantageous for Romeo to hold public office.

It was acceptable, and almost recommended, for Romeo to beat his wife if she were not submissive.

Romeo would have had complete control over his children.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN THE 1200-1400s

Renaissance Fashion

People of the Italian Renaissance were particular about appearances. Noble women wore elaborate gowns that were heavy and long. To keep a dress from dragging through the mud, they teetered along on fancy platform clogs, sometimes over six inches high. Eventually clogs became so high that ladies had to be supported by their maids while walking. Renaissance men were also very concerned about fashion. Many wore skin-tight hose underneath long jackets. The outfit was topped off by a cap with feather plumes.

