Early Modern Histories of Time

The Periodizations of Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England

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with unnatural speed, amphibious creatures endowed with reason, and the overhanging, black hemisphere of night descending upon us like one of those canoes. So thoughts and associations erupt, scatter and coalesce without rule. The poet is thoroughly enjoying this resonant chaos, as the dark hemisphere falls. Let's in.

CHAPTER 9

Love Poetry and Periodization

Julianne Werlin

The individual life is among the most persistent units of periodization. In monarchies, regnal dating usually concludes with deaths and so aligns, at least at one edge, with the life cycle; in traditional societies, powerful families understand their historical trajectory via genealogy; modern media confers names and distinctive characteristics on each succeeding generation; and virtually everyone uses the course of his or her own life as a kind of personal yardstick to measure the passage of time. Most people, too, have expectations about the basic, biological course of that life, from development to reproduction to death—even if such expectations are often bound to be disappointed. In short, the human life provides a template that organizes personal experience and subsumes history. Yet the life cycle itself, while subject to biological limits, is far from perfectly stable across historical periods: rates of birth, death, and migration fluctuate with social, political, and economic events. Demography, which first emerged within Europe as a subject of research in the seventeenth century, tracks such changes in the aggregate. But practically the whole sum of culture responds to them in one way or another. As I will suggest in what follows, even a genre as apparently timeless as love poetry reflects variations in demographic trends affecting the life cycle. In fact, in its focus on personal experience, it gives us a distinctive point of access to demographic pressures. For poetry helps to reveal not only what it felt like to live within a given period, but what it felt like to be a particular kind of period—to have certain life expectations, characterized by a distinctive rhythm of maturity and aging, reproduction and mortality. For scholars of early modernity, this intimate form of historical temporality can serve as a point of contact between the smaller arcs of private experience and the wider trajectories of social change.
The bulk of what is now studied as English Renaissance lyric—spanning across Spenser, Shakespeare, Donne, Herbert, the Cavaliers, and Milton’s youthful lyrics—was written at or near the beginning of a period of population stagnation. After uneven growth in the centuries following the Black Death (1346–53), over the course of the sixteenth century the population of England expanded rapidly from under 3 million to approximately 4 million. In the seventeenth century, this period of expansion came to a halt, as growth first slowed, then leveled off in the second half of the century. England was comparatively lucky. On average, the population of Europe held steady between 1600 and 1650, from approximately 111 million to 112 million, but this total included many regions that experienced decline; in Italy, for example, the population shrank from approximately 13.5 million to 11.7 million between 1600 and 1650. These figures, which reflect the toll of scarcity, disease, and war, are grim but not surprising. Preindustrial, agrarian populations are characterized by periodic expansions and contractions, and although the precise mechanisms that drive these cycles are much debated, the reoccurrence of intervals of devastatingly high mortality, sometimes in tandem with low fertility, are not.

Looking backward toward the European past, then, it is tempting to interpret the seventeenth century’s population stagnation or decline merely as a new phase of a familiar cycle. If so, however, it was the last one. Social and economic changes beginning in the seventeenth century prepared the way for economic growth, enabling the European population explosion that would begin in England at the end of the eighteenth century with the Industrial Revolution, and continue through the nineteenth. Early modernity, then, seems to represent the first tentative steps toward a new era rather than the concluding phase of an old. In demography as in so much else, the seventeenth century truly merits its characterization as a transitional age.

To people living through this transition, of course, neither the past nor the future of the English population was apparent. Nor, for that matter, was its present, at least until the groundbreaking statistical estimates of Gregory King at the end of the seventeenth century. Yet the numerous processes that shaped population, from urbanization to prices to occupational structure to inheritance, were not just perceptible: they were among the most obvious and the most contentious features of contemporary society. None of them had a more direct connection to population and none was the subject of more discussion than marriage. The formation of new families is an event with important demographic implications in any culture; for that reason, it is also typically the focus of intense scrutiny and comment. In seventeenth-century England, a society with a relatively low rate of illegitimate births, the timing and rate of marriage were crucial for the expansion or contraction of the population, and both were influenced and reshaped by emerging social norms.

Beginning in the 1960s, historians of the family sought to connect the rate and timing of early modern marriage in order to arrive at a broad and synthetic narrative of social change and the transition to modernity. In doing so, they raised fundamental questions for the interpretation of the domestic sphere: Did an increasing emphasis on the nuclear family, to the exclusion of wider kin groups, contribute to the rise of what Lawrence Stone called “affective individualism”? Did greater scope for individual choice in marriage heighten the importance attached to domestic love? And did the fall in the average age at first marriage and the concurrent rise in illegitimate births toward the end of the eighteenth century represent a release of erotic energy—or simply a redirection of it? Though answers to such questions remained contested, merely posing them represented a powerful insight. It showed that cultural and demographic categories were interconnected, suggesting that the meaning of early modern marriage could not be understood fully without examining the blunt and apparently unrevealing measures of its timing and rate. The reverse was, of course, equally true; the incidence of marriage depended on what the institution was taken to mean. Population history and cultural change met in this intimate event within the individual life.

The popularity of demographically informed family history flowed and then ebbed, without ever really reaching the field of poetics. Yet few forms responded more directly or insistently to the early modern erotic climate than lyric verse. As a sixteen-year-old George Herbert preciously complained, “Doth poetry / Wear Venus’ livery? Only serve her turn?” Poetry’s dedication to Venus brought it into contact, and into conflict, with the social mores and demographic patterns of its era. In what follows, I will suggest that the values of medieval and Petrarchan love poetry were predicated on a specific pattern of marriage; as that subtly altered, so did the form and content of erotic lyric. Here as elsewhere, timing was everything: the age at which people tended to marry was both a measure and force of cultural change. Needless to say, the timing of marriage was always a response to other factors; any given person might choose to marry at a particular moment for a range of reasons, from personal inclination to imperatives shaped by religious, legal, and economic variables. Yet by considering the average age and rate of marriage directly, by bringing this crucial aspect of the background of erotic and matrimonial
culture into the foreground, it is possible to perceive how individuals' life expectations varied in response to the fluctuations of wider historical and demographic change. Love poetry is obviously connected to the erotic life cycle. And it is also, I will show, deeply imbricated with the wider fluctuations of demography. For this reason, it gives modern readers access to an experience of a kind of periodization that both underlies and drives larger and more abstract historical narratives.

Marriage

Aside from migration, two factors govern population growth or decline: rates of birth and death. Writing at the end of the sixteenth century, the Italian political theorist Giovanni Botero grasped this principle. For Botero, population was determined by the balance of two opposed forces: the "generative" ability of people and the "nutritive" ability of societies. In his judgment, death could fluctuate, but reproduction was a constant: the rate of procreation is transhistorical, remaining steady across eras. It leads population to rise steadily until it is inevitably checked by starvation when total numbers exceed what can be sustained within a given area.12 The life cycle was not a fixed period, but variation only occurred at its terminal point. More than two hundred years later, Thomas Malthus's initial assessment was not at first substantially different: population will tend to increase, he argued, until it exceeds the carrying capacity of the land, leading to mortality crises, which again reduce it. Malthus called this the positive check, and its unforgiving logic shapes the bleak moral calculus of his work. In revising his Essay on the Principle of Population for a second edition in 1803, however, he gave an increased (though still inferior) role to another method of stabilizing population. Growth could also be slowed or reversed by restricting procreation: this was the preventative check. For Malthus, it was tantamount to limiting or delaying marriage; from his cultural vantage point, he did not see either procreation outside of marriage or birth control within it as significant variables—assumptions that have proved to be more or less accurate for the seventeenth century.13 What the Malthusian idea of the preventative check proposed, then, was that the timing of two events within the human life cycle could shape population: marriage and death.

Rather surprisingly, toward the end of the twentieth century, Malthus's preventative check moved to the center of historical research. The findings of the Cambridge group for the history of population, detailed in E. A. Wrigley and Roger Schofield's The Population History of England, provided new information for scholars of English demography. In presenting their research, Wrigley and Schofield offered an attractively bold explanation for population change built around the role of the preventative check. Marriage, rather than death, was at the core of demographic change: it was "the hinge on which the demographic system turned."14 Because English couples were expected to have the resources to form new households in order to marry, many would be unable to do so in times of scarcity, leading to a fall in the marriage rate. Such changes in nuptiality, Wrigley and Schofield argued, were responsible for population stagnation in the seventeenth century and its growth in the eighteenth century.15 Since the publication of The Population History of England, the "preventative check" has been a major subject of research and debate. Some scholars have eagerly sought to extend Wrigley and Schofield's model beyond England to premodern European societies in general, arguing that marriage rates tended to respond to conditions of scarcity more sensitively than death rates.16 Others have been more skeptical: could so tidy a causal model really capture the chaos of variables that shaped population?17 One thing, however, has remained clear: even if premodern marriage rates did not drive population change single-handedly, they were a crucial factor. Debates about marriage were not a mere adjunct to the history of growth and economic development, but an important part of the picture. Larger stories of social change had to take the conditions of wedlock into account.

For scholars of early modern northwest Europe, there was an additional reason for paying particular attention to the demography of marriage: the pattern of marriage in this region was one of the key features that seemed to differentiate it not only from the eastern half of the continent, but from the rest of the globe. As John Hajnal argued, from at least the sixteenth century on, much of northwestern Europe seemed to be characterized by a uniquely high average age at first marriage and, for a preindustrial, agrarian society, a high percentage of people who never married. Whereas universal teenage marriage for women was the norm across preindustrial societies—for example, in ancient Rome—in England, the Low Countries, parts of France, Italy, and Germany, and much of Scandinavia, both men and women tended to delay marriage until their twenties; men and women tended to be close in age at their first marriage; and a significant number never married at all.18 Seventeenth-century England represented the most extreme manifestation of this already unusual system. For women, the average age at first marriage
was twenty-five to twenty-six; for men, it was twenty-seven to twenty-eight. At the same time, an extremely large proportion of people did not wed. For most of the sixteenth century, the proportion of the unwed hovered around 1 percent; however, for the cohort who came of age in the 1590s, it rose steeply: by 1600, the share of people coming of age who would never marry had risen to the astonishingly high rate of almost 25 percent, where it would hold for most of the century. This distinctively "low pressure" demographic system stands in contrast to the "high pressure" systems typical of pre-industrial societies with a lower age at marriage, with correspondingly higher birthrates, combined with higher death rates. A "low pressure" system may have helped to enable a higher standard of living, perhaps facilitating economic development. There can be no question that this feature of life was deeply intertwined with the culture’s mores and norms, and however complexly, that it shaped the expectations and desires of the men and women of the seventeenth century. Marriage, a crucial component of adulthood, was desired by most, yet the high rate of people who never married in the seventeenth century meant that it always had to be regarded as a "privilege rather than a right."

This fact, combined with the late average age of marriage, opened a long window of uncertainty. Many young men and women must have spent their twenties, and perhaps later decades, wondering whether they would be able to marry at all. As I will suggest below, there is no reason to suppose that poets were not among them.

The timing of marriage was closely connected to social and economic norms. Young people in England typically left their family homes in order to work for others while accumulating resources to form their own households. While contributing to delays in marriage, this practice also opened the possibility of a degree of autonomy in choosing spouses. For the most part, historians have depicted a system in which common people could have a surprising amount of freedom in choosing marriage partners throughout the early modern period, although this freedom extended unevenly, especially for women. Already in 1582, one writer could suggest that "the office of Free choice, is the roote or foundation of Marriage."

For the aristocracy, however, the situation was different. Their matches typically remained alliances carefully arranged by parents. This was at once a cause and a consequence of the fact that they were on a different demographic cycle. The peerage married younger than commoners, with a median age at first marriage of about twenty for women and twenty-four to twenty-five for men (a tendency with a subtle but unmistakable consequence for population).

Although young people occasionally defied authority, they did so at the risk of severe strictures. In the highest ranks of society, then, free choice still played an inferior role in contracting marriages. Even there, however, it has been argued that things were shifting in the direction of growing autonomy. Choice was beginning to play a larger role than it had in previous centuries.

But on what principles were individuals to choose? Economic and social advantages no doubt continued to be important factors, then as now. Needless to say, theological and legal categories also exerted a shaping influence on the conditions of marriage, though in the contentious environment of post-Reformation Europe, they were themselves subject to bitter conflict, debate, and revision. At the same time, less material but no less important factors came into consideration. Advice on marriage understood as a moral and emotional relationship was plentiful, as sermons and conduct guides illustrate clearly. Such works emphasized compatibility based on virtuous behavior; desire based on attraction was not recommended as a consideration, and in fact was often positively discouraged. Yet erotic passion nevertheless provided a powerful principle of choice for many. In later centuries, falling in love would come to seem like the ideal prelude to entering into matrimony; in the seventeenth century, erotic passion was only one consideration among others in choosing a partner, and as classical literature amply illustrates, it was far from a new one. But there was a growing cultural sense of its importance and desirability, at least in part for reasons connected to the structure and timing of marriage itself. In no other context could erotic passion develop as so powerful a desideratum for choosing spouses as in a society in which late marriage and a broad scope for individual choice created an opening for romantic courtship to lead to marriage. Increasingly, an extended phase of erotic passion was becoming integrated, at least in theory, into the life cycle itself. Conversely, passionate love was becoming more tightly linked to a decisive moment within the period of the life.

This emotional periodization had profound consequences for literary history. In the seventeenth century, an ever greater number of literary texts centered on courtship and the contracting of marriages. Comedies thrived in the theater, and a new style of prose romance, focusing on love rather than heroic action, had just come into fashion. To a much greater degree than in any preceding era, marriage plots were becoming a key subject of literature, laying the foundations on which the domestic fiction of the eighteenth century, and indeed of our own age, would build. Of the many preoccupations that emerge in such texts, none was as persistent as love. As George Puttenham
 remarked, "Love is of all other humane affections the ... most generall to all sorts and ages of men and women." As I will suggest, however, in other genres the effect was considerably more ambivalent.

Poetry

Shifts in the institution of marriage could not fail to be felt across the whole range of culture. In poetry, the effect was particularly pronounced, for eroticism was the one truly indispensable subject of secular verse. Who writes "in meeter, at least in the mother tung, but to express the affections caused by women?" asks Cesare Gonzaga in Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier*, and many early modern English poets shared his view. Verse was deeply embedded within the erotic system. It was not merely a general repository of erotic sentiments, but a form of communication and persuasion that might, in the right circumstances, follow or even shape the course of a real attachment. Sonnets themselves could serve as love tokens; posies—simple mottoes or poems of a few lines—were engraved on rings, or embroidered on handkerchiefs and gloves. Though poetry was only one component of erotic practice among many, its links with the culture of love nevertheless ensured that it was responsive to changes within it. As I will show in what follows, shifting features of the erotic and demographic landscape had profound consequences for Elizabethan and early Stuart love lyric. At the same time, lyric reveals how a select few experienced changes in what was by any measure one of the landmarks of human life, marriage.

Much of the love poetry written in or around courts and aristocratic households in the late sixteenth century drew on a style of literary eroticism derived from two strands: medieval verse and the more recent influence of Petrarchan lyric on English poetry. The ideals and conventions conveyed by these traditions were far from uniform, but they did share some common tendencies. On the whole, both presented an idea of love as heterosexual, aristocratic, and adulterous. The celebrated mistresses of erotic lyric were generally married—but not to the poet. Whether they were consummated or remained chaste, the courtships elaborately depicted in verse therefore led away from the domestic sphere, not, as in both earlier and later forms of romance, toward it. Needless to say, there had always been tensions within these traditions: genres of verse that were not merely tolerant of, but actually predicated upon extramarital passions could be counted on to incur opposition from some quarters. Nevertheless, the appeal of this paradigm was both powerful and undeniable, even in the late sixteenth century.

The conditions of aristocratic marriage help to provide a context both for the persistence of older erotic ideals and their gradual transformation. Marriages arranged for youthful partners by their families offered no obvious opening for the subtle forms of courtship and seduction at the core of aristocratic love poetry. Nor could an arranged match serve as an obvious thematic basis for the freely chosen and noninstrumental passion idealized in erotic verse. In such circumstances, then, it was no surprise that love lyric should be directed toward potential mistresses, rather than potential wives. This tendency is illustrated in what was perhaps the most influential late Elizabethan sonnet sequence, Philip Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella*. Sidney's sequence shares many of the values of conventional Petrarchan verse. Stella is beautiful and unyielding, Astrophil's passion is destined to remain unsatisfied. But unlike Petrarch's Laura and many of her later counterparts, she is not indifferent to his advances. In her very denial of Astrophil's attempt at seduction, Stella expresses her own passion:

Trust me, while I thee deny,
In my self the smart I try;
Tyrant honour doth thus use thee;
Stella's self might not refuse thee.

"Tyrant honour," the prohibition of sex outside of marriage, is the only impediment to fulfillment. By depicting Stella's marriage as the sole obstacle to Astrophil and Stella's sexual consummation, Sidney posed the contest between love and marriage as the central motif of the sonnet sequence: in his lines, the two were neither convergent nor even complementary, but sharply at odds. Sidney's sequence is a carefully constructed fiction, composed along conventional lines. Yet in this case, the convention corresponded, however loosely, to life. The woman generally thought to be behind Stella, Penelope Rich née Devereux, was married at the age of eighteen, apparently with considerable reluctance. In such circumstances, it is not particularly surprising that romance should follow rather than anticipate marriage.

Even as Sidney wrote, however, erotic literary conventions were under pressure. From the start, Elizabethan poets revealed a deep ambivalence about Petrarchan tropes in the course of adopting them; there was a bitter vein of irony running through English love poetry. No doubt many factors
contributed to poets' attitudes. But one of the deepest and most enduring challenges to older principles lay in a new pattern and ideology of marriage, which made it increasingly difficult to treat adulterous love as something to be valorized. This shift had an analogue in demographic trends. Among the nobility, marriages began to take place slightly later, with very early marriages becoming less common; whereas between 1540 and 1599, 21 percent of peers and their heirs had been married by the age of seventeen, between 1600 and 1659, only 12 percent were. While most aristocratic marriages did not hinge on courtship in any case, when individuals married by the age of seventeen, there was not likely to be an interval in which it could occur. Later marriage was, therefore, at least one prerequisite for the emergence of courtship as a factor in marital choice. This shift in patterns corresponded to changing expectations and values. Walter Raleigh, for example, urges his son to exercise patience in marrying: "Thy best time will be towards thirty, for... the younger times are unfit, eyther to chuse or to govern a Wife and family." Raleigh hardly represents a typical member of the English elite. Yet his advice, which was widely read, was in keeping with contemporary perceptions.

At the same time, many writers were members of considerably less exalted families than Sidney and typically held different attitudes and expectations toward marriage, as toward so much else. While there is as yet no systematic prosopography of early modern poets, it is well-known that many, from Daniel and Donne to Cowley and Milton, wrote verse from perspectives shaped by their upbringing as the children of artisans and citizens. The tradition of erotic lyric could, of course, be drawn on by people from a variety of backgrounds; all sorts of writers made use of its symbolic inventory and its emotional repertoire. But it could also be adapted to reflect a different life experience.

Edmund Spenser's sonnet sequence, the Amoretti, shows what this could look like in practice. Drawing on his own experience, Spenser showed how the erotic claims of marital courtship could be reconciled with the tradition of Petrarchan love poetry. The Amoretti was written for Elizabeth Boyle, the woman who would become his second wife, and concludes with an epitaph in celebration of their marriage. This was not an arranged match; at least on Spenser's part, neither was it a particularly youthful one: he was a widower of forty-two when he married Elizabeth, who may have been as young as eighteen. Perhaps in part as a result, he seems to have lacked neither the opportunity nor autonomy to engage in an extended period of courtship, reflected in his sonnet sequence. Indeed, he himself connects these two aspects of his courtship, his relatively advanced age and the time he has spent wooing, in Sonnet LX:

So since the winged God his planet cleare
began in me to move, one yeare is spent:
the which doth longer unto me appeare,
than al those fourty which my life outwent.

The relationship between eroticism and marriage in the Amoretti is not, of course, merely the product of Spenser's personal circumstances. Rather, it reflects the converging pressure of two forces: an increasingly powerful conception of marriage as the necessary terminus ad quem of passionate love within the culture at large, and the different attitude toward marriage characteristic of members of Spenser's social background. Though most of Spenser's contemporaries did not follow his example, there are hints that the erotic, as well as religious and moral, claims of marriage were becoming increasingly difficult to ignore. "A man may be in love, and not marry; and yet wise," Giles Fletcher writes in the amusing address to the reader that precedes his rather conventional sonnet cycle, Licia, "but he cannot marry and not be in love, but be a mere fool."

When the marriage rate plummeted in the 1590s, it reinforced existing tendencies. For different reasons, some of the very richest and many of the very poorest had to reckon with serious obstacles to wedlock. The climate of eroticism could not fail to be affected by developments that left nearly a quarter of men and women permanently single. The problem seems to have been readily apparent at the time, for the literature of the period is full of complaints about the difficulty of making a match in a newly competitive marriage market. As a result, most people would have had several years of single life as adults, with a relatively high degree of uncertainty as to whether marriage would occur. This is, of course, no less true of poets than anyone else. Much of the love poetry of the seventeenth century was written in precisely this interval of uncertainty. It is striking to observe how many of the most prominent love poets of the seventeenth century, including Herrick, Carew, Suckling, Lovelace, and Randolph, never married. Milton, with three marriages, was a demographic outlier, whose preoccupation with the nuptial state would shape his verse (and prose) deeply. Yet even in his case, a large percentage of his lyric poems were written before his comparatively late first marriage, at the age of thirty-five.
One of Herrick’s best-known poems helps to illustrate the connection between nuptiality and shifting erotic values. “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time” is generally read as a seventeenth-century take on the carpe diem theme, a lyric about pursuing erotic opportunity in the face of inevitable death. In a way, of course, it is. But it is a poem very different from its classical predecessors in the genre, and that difference reveals a great deal about the changing context of seventeenth-century eroticism and matrimony. Herrick begins conventionally enough:

Gather ye Rose-buds while ye may,
Old Time is still a flying;
And this same flower that smiles to day,
To morrow will be dying.

Approaching death makes life, and erotic fulfillment, urgent. So far, so ordinary. The poem’s conclusion, however, is more surprising:

Then be not coy, but use your time;
And while ye may, go marry:
For having lost but once your prime,
You may in ever tarry.43

Herrick’s point in the final stanza is fundamentally different from the idea expressed in the first: the virgins are not being urged to make the most of the fleeting passage of life, but of the brief window of nubility. The threat that one might “forever tarry” has little to do with death; in some respects, it is inimical to it. Spinsterhood, not mortality, is the looming danger. The carpe diem theme was popular with Roman poets, and its revival owes much to the rediscovery of figures such as Catullus. But no Roman poet would have expressed the idea motivating Herrick’s poem, for the simple reason that virtually no Roman women failed to marry.44 The English stereotype of the “spinsters” — a word that became a legal designation for unmarried women in the seventeenth century — did not exist.45 The idea that finding a spouse could be a matter of some urgency for women as well as men, and that it might require some individual effort or initiative on the part of the potential bride, simply would not have arisen in most preindustrial societies. In a society in which nearly a quarter of men and women would remain single, however, the relevance of Herrick’s warning would have been clear. In this context, the shift of erotic emphasis from illicit sexual consummation to marriage also makes eminent sense.

Like Spenser’s Amoretti, Herrick’s “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time” represents the adaptation of a style of eroticism closely linked with adultery to a new cultural and demographic context. In doing so, both works reflect the climate of elite eroticism at their historical moment. In the Caroline era, as in the Elizabethan, love was indispensable to the aesthetic of the court. Almost every poet writing secular poetry in the 1620s, 1630s, and 1640s had to address the “problem” of love in one way or another. In many respects, the varied methods by which they did so echo the strategies visible in the poetry of the 1590s, yet it was clear that adulterous love, as distinct from mere desire, had lost much of its power as a genuine rival to nuptial eroticism. Platonic love, the stylized erotic aesthetic cultivated in the French court of Charles and Henrietta Maria, attempted to reconcile the old tradition of courtly eroticism to marital love by synthesizing ideals of order and freedom, chastity and sensuality, marital and adulterous love. The confusion of this assortment of elements, and the very mixed reception granted to Platonic love, is an indication of the increasing difficulty of maintaining any form of idealized eroticism that did not explicitly and entirely culminate in marriage.

Integrating marriage into the conceptual repertoire of love lyric was one solution to the problem. There was another answer, however, that proved to be at least as important: the adoption of the anti-idealistic erotic characteristic of libertine verse. The prominence of libertine verse within the Caroline court may seem like a sign that the bonds of marriage were weakening within certain circles, or at least under serious attack. Certainly many contemporaries interpreted events in this way. In fact, however, the situation was precisely the reverse. The rise of libertine poetry in the 1630s may well be the single best testament to the increasing power of marriage within the erotic system. For it was only by writing in a vein of casual eroticism, detached from the serious associations of Petrarchan love, that poets could resolve the sharpening contradiction between adulterous love and marriage. They did so, however, at a high cost — by denying extramarital sexuality the status of true love, and by extension, the poetic and intellectual legacy of fin’amour. Poets were aware that they were working within what was in many ways a diminished field. A. J. Smith observes, “If the young bloods and rakes now take over love poetry this is no mere modish annexation but a mark of what love has come to mean, and perhaps even a portent of what life no longer means.”46 For many contemporaries, although such poems made ample use of the word “love,” they
had already ceased to be love poems; rather, they were, in the words of the poet William Habington, merely "loose coppies of lust happily exprest."\(^{46}\)

At the same time, a few poets toyed with a different but complementary response: the disgusted rejection of sexual acts. The poems of the 1690s on the theme "against fruition" participated in libertine tropes in an unusual manner, by arguing against sex. It was Ben Jonson, translating an anonymous Latin fragment wrongly supposed to have been written by Petronius, who touched off the subgenre.\(^{47}\) Jonson’s translation stayed close to the original, which argued that erotic play is superior to consumption, since "doing, a filthy pleasure is and short," whereas to "together closely lie, and kiss" will allow the lovers to keep "endlesse Holy-day," prolonging their sensuous pleasure indefinitely.\(^{48}\) But John Suckling, who wrote the most influential treatment of the theme, gave it a different inflection. In his poem "Against Fruition," there is something distasteful not just in consummation, but in all sexual reality, which wakes the lover "rudely from sweet dreams."\(^{49}\) A libertine defense of chastity is paradoxical, but like most paradoxes, it had an internal logic: the same demotion of extramarital sexual love that made it possible to treat it as a source of casual pleasure also made it easy to turn aside in disgust.

There was, of course, a condition within which sex was explicitly encouraged, at least for the purposes of procreation, and the implicit link between marital sexuality and procreation helps to suggest exactly what Suckling is opposing and why. "The World is of a vast extent we see, / And must be peopled," Suckling writes, before proposing, however, that "since there are enough / Born to the drudgery, what need we plough?"\(^{50}\) Is a relationship to marriage implied by a focus on reproduction part of what makes it off-limits for Suckling’s eroticism? Edmund Waller, in a poem written in response to Suckling’s "Against Fruition," suggests that marriage may well enter into the equation: his defense of sexuality includes imagining the kisses of a "happy Pair" whose "joys just Hymen warrants all the night," as well as the satisfaction of producing heirs.\(^{51}\) What the poetry of Suckling and his contemporaries reveals, then, is how deeply the place of love had shifted in response to a new understanding and a new set of cultural expectations about the role marriage would play within individual lives. Suckling’s mood and tone, his irony and his disgust, are not incidental to this story; rather, they help to reveal what it was like to experience the trailing effects of cultural and demographic history.

By the Restoration, the contest between marital and extramarital passion was all but resolved—or had at least reached a kind of truce. The two no longer appeared to be rival forms of love, but rather incommensurable experiences, with different emotions and practices attached. In a poem like John Wilmot, the Earl of Rochester’s "The Imperfect Enjoyment," the central conceit could even turn on their opposition. Complainting about impotence in the arms of his beloved, Rochester addresses his penis in order to ask why it is "So true to lewdness, so untrue to love?" Despite his ability to perform with "all he meets," "when great Love the oner does command, / Base recreant to thy prince, thou dar’st not stand." Rochester’s poem reads like a parody of the cult of Platonic love—or an even more distant Elizabethan Petrarchism. Yet it is clear that much has changed. Unsatisfied desire is still the central motif of poetry, but now it is love itself that forestalls consummation, not virtue, fate, female indifference, or any of the other conventional obstacles.

**Conclusion**

For Rochester, love excludes extramarital sexuality. Though idiosyncratic in many respects, Rochester’s verse points toward an emerging sensibility: By the end of the seventeenth century, the medieval and Renaissance ideals of love that received some of their most powerful expressions in lyrical and with which lyric was in turn closely associated were no longer viable. Though love would certainly not disappear from poetry, after the late seventeenth century, the two would never again be as closely identified as they had been in earlier periods. Fragments of the tradition of erotic lyric were appropriated across genres—drama, printed commonplace books, and even epic, in that work of nuptial eroticism, *Paradise Lost*. Such works used but were not themselves lyric; in some cases, they owed as much to their opposition to the tradition of courtly love poetry as to their appropriation of it. Instead, they pointed the way toward the new literary norm: the relationship between marriage or courtship and the novel. It is no coincidence that in the landmark novel of the eighteenth century, *Clarissa*, Samuel Richardson named the figure who leads the heroine away from marriage, Lovelace, after a lyric poet.

Much of the most important love lyric in England was written in the brief but extraordinarily rich interval between Sidney and the Cavaliers. It was composed during an interval of demographic stagnation, in which England’s marriage rate was, for a preindustrial society, exceptionally (or perhaps uniquely) low, and as I have tried to show in this essay, much of it can be understood as an extended response to the pressures and values associated with that tendency. The Renaissance love lyric can seem to stand outside of time,
inhabiting a repetitive world with few incidents and fewer actors. This pose is, of course, deceptive, and numerous studies have sought to reveal the historical logic behind poets' choices by situating their work within the contours of a given period. That is to say, for the most part, historicizing poetry has meant placing it within preexisting forms of periodization, many of them taken from political or economic history. Such an approach can be highly illuminating. But in considering the assumptions of love poetry together with the cultural reality of early modern demographics, by treating its native themes of love and marriage as both historically and aesthetically central, a different form of periodization emerges. As a result the tendencies of the genre itself, from its imaginative strategies to its ultimate supersession, help to reveal deep features of the period's population history ignored by many accounts. In a way, it is not surprising that love poetry should provide a window onto the social history of the era. The rhythms of lives are a fundamental form of periodization, and few things organize the life more profoundly than the intimate rituals governing reproduction. Love lyric is both a response to the life cycle and one of our richest resources for reflecting on its form.
9. LOVE POETRY AND PERIODIZATION


27. William Whately, A bride-bush, or A wedding sermon compeediously describing the duties of married persons (London, 1617); William Gouge, Of domesticall duties (London, 1622).


41. Giles Fletcher, Licia, or Poems of love in honour of the admirable and singular vertues of his lady (Cambridge, 1593).

42. Among the nobility, the situation was particularly difficult for younger sons: Ralph Houlbrooke notes that 42 percent of younger sons of dukes remained unmarried at age thirty between 1530 and 1679 (English Family, 65). For the poor, Steve Hindle shows that after the establishment of poor rates at the beginning of the seventeenth century, members of the local gentry became especially eager to prevent “pauper marriages,” which might result in children for whose charge the community would be responsible. See Steve Hindle, “The Problem of Pauper Marriage in Seventeenth-Century England: The Alexander Prize Essay,” Transactions of the Royal Historical Society, Fifth Series, 8 (1998): 71–90.


44. Harper, From Shame to Sin, 40.


47. William Habington, Castara (London, 1631). Habington’s marriage-minded love sequence records his courtship of Lucy Herbert, against the wishes of her family, providing interesting evidence of how amorous lyric, applied to courtship, could reinforce the status of individual choice within marriage.


10. SHAKESPEARE, PERIOD


12. For this tagline, see http://nfs.sparknotes.com/, accessed May 8, 2018.


II. PERIODIC SHAKESPEARE


