

Nancy Mohrlock Bunker. *Marriage and Land Law in Shakespeare and Middleton*. Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2014. viii + 267 pp. \$80.00. Review by ELISA OH, HOWARD UNIVERSITY.

Nancy Mohrlock Bunker's *Marriage and Land Law in Shakespeare and Middleton* traces the representation of economic laws and social practices of inheritance in early modern marriage comedies from 1590-1615. She contextualizes the 10 focal plays and the 21 marriages they encompass by analyzing each financial transaction in relation to contemporary changes in marriage and property laws in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In each chapter Bunker pairs a Shakespeare and a Middleton play that highlight the deceptions used to try to achieve both the free choice of spouse and inheritance of land. Each marriage negotiation between two generations also "brings into direct competition two social and legal orders—one feudal and patriarchal in its assertion of kinship, the other mercantile and negotiative in pursuit of individual desires" (3), and the triumph of a manipulative and materially self-interested younger generation marks a cultural move toward individual choice and companionate marriage. Though the individualistic younger generation apparently "wins" in the comedic resolutions, Bunker finally argues that the plays do not wholly embrace these new value systems and that relations between generations as well as the landed gentry and the rising merchant class remain in flux.

The most interesting ideas Bunker's study brings to the surface are the ways that these plays only selectively represent existing land inheritance laws and often omit typical legal modes of transferring property through marriage. For example, in these plays she notices the prominence of young grooms inheriting volatile fee simple estates and the comparative lack of jointure bargains. She interprets this emphasis as "anticipat[ing] a legal practice codified nearly a century later in the Strict Settlement" (4). The plays show that women who enter the marriage market in unconventional ways are especially vulnerable to impoverished widowhood, and the grooms have either a history of profligate financial mismanagement or no experience that would help them to guard and increase the inheritances they receive. Other than the two marriages in *Taming of the Shrew*, Bunker notes

the consistent absence of the plays' consideration of jointures and widows' dowers, which would provide economic safeguards for the future of the brides if they were widowed. However, as each chapter's investigation shows, this is but one of many ways that a patriarch can fail in his responsibility to broker prosperous and satisfying marriages for the next generation.

Chapter One juxtaposes *The Taming of the Shrew* and *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* to study the weaknesses of controlling patriarchs who are manipulated by the younger generation. Bunker notes the attractive financial assets that Baptista has to give his two daughters in the absence of a male heir: a large dowry upon marriage and all of his land equally divided upon his death. She also points out Petruchio's generous offer to give all his wealth to his wife after he dies, far more than the one-third that common law demanded. Bunker sees a partnership of equals in Kate and Petruchio's sexually charged wooing banter, and she reads companionate mutuality based on trust even in apparently antifeminist metaphors such as Petruchio's claim that he will tame Katherine, his "haggard" hawk. By misreading his daughters' outward behavior as indicative of their inner submissiveness, bargaining with imposters, and not recognizing disguised suitors, Baptista becomes a weak and failed patriarch. Similarly, the patriarch Yellowhammer in *Chaste Maid* proves to be a failure at socially advancing and financially protecting his children in their marriages: he neither investigates the validity of offers such as the true identity of Whorehound's "niece," nor does he propose establishing a jointure for Moll. Furthermore, he puts money and status ahead of his daughter's health, happiness, and choice. Bunker also usefully explicates how the law of entail affects Whorehound, Allwit, Kix, and the Touchwood Senior families and claims that "Middleton interrogates the definition and exploitation of terms such as family, legitimacy, husband, and father" (47).

Chapter Two demonstrates how absent patriarchs in *All's Well that Ends Well* and *A Trick to Catch the Old One* allow the children to have greater agency in their marriage decisions. Both plays "show class-disadvantaged women using deception to gain respectable marriage ... [but] [m]oney, status, and inheritance differentiate *All's Well* from *Trick* because Shakespeare's Bertram is stridently conscious of the social order and Middleton's Witgood shows minimal attention

to such matters" (54, 55). Bunker illustrates how Bertram's agency is limited by wardship laws, which produce tension between a spirit of parental protection and a practice of exploiting wards' property and marriages for the crown's material gain. Bunker reads Bertram's letter to Helena as a legal contract that "establishes the *assumpsit* parameters" (62), which she enterprisingly fulfills in order to achieve her desired spouse and raise her social position. The speed with which Helena moves from being scorned by Bertram to "strategic planning" leads Bunker to interpret Helena's "suffering as momentary" (68), but this argument could stand to converse directly with the critics who look askance at Helena's problematic decision to stay with this hostile spouse. Bunker contends that in the city setting of *Trick*, "experience and savvy are more important than untouched innocence or an unbroken continuity of legal possession of land. Both chastity and land tenure are demystified as commodities that can be lost and recovered by those clever and opportunistic enough to seize the advantages" (69). *Trick* also features foolish patriarchs in the greedy and competitive uncles, Pecunius Lucre and Walkadine Hoard. Bunker draws attention to Witgood and Lucre's use of premarital legal contracts to their advantage: Witgood's fictional contract with Jane serves to compel Hoard to pay off Witgood's debts in order to "release" Jane from that contract, making her available for Hoard to marry. Although neither Joyce nor Jane receives protective jointure offers, Bunker holds up Jane as a model of female intelligence and friendship and a "formidable competitor" (80) in the London marriage market. Jane's fluid identity and skilful social performances enable her to rehabilitate her reputation and acquire property through marriage.

Chapter Three contrasts *Measure for Measure* and *A Mad World, My Masters* to show how the traditional social order of marriage "reclaims" men and women who have engaged in illicit spending or premarital sex. This chapter could benefit from a clear definition of what it means to "achieve success in relation to marriage" (87). It seems that Bunker means a multifaceted "success" that combines agency in choice of partners, companionate attraction and respect, and a legally durable inheritance. However, for some characters, "success" might just mean social climbing or an honorable reputation for an unchaste woman. While Bunker sees Duke Vincentio as an initially failed patriarch due

to his leniency followed by his “experiment” with his excessively strict deputy Angelo, she believes he learns to govern with equity, the legal principles of flexibility that take intent into account to make judgments that are balanced and compassionate. Bunker emphasizes the positive social and intellectual choice Isabella and the Duke make to marry: she claims this last-minute match “signals each partner’s respectful engagement with the other and similar attention to living life utilizing the principles of equity ... the couple seeks a type of marriage founded on partnership” (101). This argument could respond to the decades of critical debate about Isabella’s final silence after the Duke’s repeated proposal to her, as it has also been persuasively interpreted as rejection or deferral of marriage on her part. In *A Mad World*, Sir Bounteous Progress comprises another failed patriarch in his callous self-indulgence, while Bunker admires Mother Gullman and her daughter Frank, the Courtesan, because both women infiltrate and manipulate the patriarchal system of reputation and inheritance to achieve a socially advantageous marriage for Frank. Bunker praises Mother Gullman as the “savvy negotiator” (88) who does the job of a patriarch better than any of the male characters. The fact that Frank Gullman is able to transition from an unchaste unmarried woman to a respectable wife without “any apocalyptic fuss” (122) and the fact that there is not an equivalent character arc in Shakespeare’s plays lead Bunker to “place Middleton on the side of liberal flexibility and parity between men and women and Shakespeare on the side of authoritarian morality and double standard” (122).

Chapter Four asserts that the strong and wealthy female protagonists in *The Merchant of Venice* and *The Roaring Girl* “defy gender conventions and utilize patriarchal restrictions for their own ends” (127), which are to “broker themselves” despite the opposition of cruel male antagonists. Though Portia is bound by postmortem patriarchal control over her marriage and dowry, she tries to help Bassanio choose the correct casket, and she lets him know “that she intends to retain some agency in the marriage” (135), particularly over the money, which comes entirely from her. Her agency in the marriage takes the form of her generous gift to Bassanio to pay Antonio’s debt, and her fortune, body, and promised marital fidelity are all conflated in the symbolic ring she gives him. Jessica brokers herself by stealing from her father

to finance her marriage portion. Bunker points out how each of the “three grooms in *Merchant* are without parents, inheritance, or personal fortune with which to start marital life” (140) and consequently cannot provide the security of a jointure for the brides. As Shylock loses his estate in court, Antonio steps in to act the part of the patriarch for Jessica and Lorenzo rather than for Bassanio. Bunker describes each major character as “embrac[ing] excessive credit or gambbl[ing] recklessly” (149), but in the end agency and authority reside with Portia. In *Roaring Girl*, Bunker argues that Moll’s male attire disrupts traditional hierarchies of class and gender distinction. By unsettling Sir Alexander Wengrave so deeply that he releases Sebastian’s rightful inheritance, thus enabling the companionate marriage with Mary, Moll takes the place of an effective, selfless patriarch who should broker a good personal and financial match for his children.

In Chapter Five Bunker pairs *Much Ado About Nothing* and *No Wit, No Help Like a Woman’s* to discuss companionate marriage and the ever-shifting role of patriarch, which is played by uncle, friar, friend, women brokering themselves, and women on behalf of other women. Though no one speaks of jointure, dowry, or inheritance in their courtship or marriage, Beatrice and Benedick are held up as the consummate example of a companionate couple, since they have long known each other, test their individuality and equality within the relationship, and grow in self-knowledge. An orphan, Beatrice is little controlled in her marital choice by her uncle Leonato, and comparatively poor soldier Benedick must broker his own marriage. Bunker suggests that the “marriage between Claudio and Hero suffers from too much patriarchal intervention as family friend Don Pedro matches the couple” (180), and patriarch Leonato unconventionally abandons his daughter and heir Hero when he sides with her accusers at the abortive wedding. Bunker asserts that this play’s marriages “illustrat[e] the vulnerability of passivity and the virtues of active self-presentation, even for women” (180). In *No Wit*, the wealthy widow Lady Goldenfleece suffers acute personal and social pain as a result of “tak[ing] on patriarchal characteristics” (180) and brokering her own remarriage: Lambstone is revealed to be a heartless fortune hunter, and Mistress Low-water traps her in a fictional marriage and then publicly shames her as a form of community discipline for the

Goldenfleeces' usury. Low-water's revenge makes Lady Goldenfleece take moral responsibility for the unethical financial practices of her late husband by turning inheritance law against her. So infatuated with cross-dressed Low-water that she does not take legal precautions to protect her estate from her new "husband," Lady Goldenfleece finds herself accused of adultery on her wedding night and yet apparently unable to break the marriage or control any of her own fortune due to the husband's legally guaranteed marital right over her estate. Bunker finds Lady Goldenfleece to be well matched with a poor but companionate partner in Beveril, and she also notes the companionate pattern in the *Twilight* and *Sandfield* couples, who all have chosen their respective partners for personal compatibility and attraction rather than patriarchal command.

Bunker's observations such as that the characters' language in these marriage comedies is highly sexualized, that female characters play an active role in choosing their partners and effecting their own marriages, and that disguise is an integral part of each plot are not always original. The introduction and each chapter would benefit from a more comprehensive integration of additional critical opinions to broaden and deepen the close readings. Although Bunker cites selected opinions of other scholars, her readings of each play are not consistently presented in dialogue with this critical commentary, and her own assertions are often expressed as tentative or conditional "suggestions" that require more boldness. There is no sustained theoretical framework that shapes the analyses of the plays, other than the premise that the plays reflect and evaluate the historical and cultural context of early modern marriage laws. However, the subject matter of social climbing, challenging patriarchs' control of marriage, self-interested economic trickery, and the fluctuating agency and social protection of women in early modern marriage suggest fruitful possibilities in Marxist and feminist theories. More careful editing would catch slips like Portia's love for "Bertram" (6). Historians of early modern English land law and scholars thinking thematically about these marriage plays will find this study useful.