

alternative to marriage for upper-class women was joining a convent. As a result, convents filled up with women denied the chance to lead a secular life yet with little interest in the religious life. Second, as the size of dowries increased, so did the power and influence of the women who were lucky enough to receive them. Indeed, wealthy women clearly recognized the advantages of a larger dowry, and their wills are filled with contributions to the dowries of their female relatives.

ESSAYS

Because the sources available for the study of the private lives of elite men and women are so much more abundant than for other classes most scholarship on gender in the Renaissance has been confined to the upper class (one notable exception is Judith Brown's article on working-class women in Chapter 3). The two essays that follow offer nearly opposite views of women's position in the patrilineal society of Renaissance Italy. Christiane Klapisch-Zuber (see Chapter 4) of the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris, based on extensive study of Florentine diaries (*ricordanze* see representative excerpts in Chapters 3 and 4), argues that women were insignificant players in the marriage alliance, which was arranged by two groups of men: on the one hand her father, uncles, brothers, and other relatives (her "agnatic" kin), and on the other, her husband and his family (her "cognatic" kin). Indeed, women were so powerless that, if widowed, their father and brothers could force them to remarry, thus using the family property contained in the woman's dowry to forge new kinship ties for their own political and social advantage. A woman in such a position would, nevertheless, be accused of being a "cruel mother" because she was forbidden to bring children from a first marriage (one patriline) to live with her and a second husband (another patriline). Stanley Chojnacki, who teaches at the University of North Carolina, pioneered the study of gender, politics, and society in his work on the fifteenth-century Venetian patriciate. In the essay reprinted here, based largely on studying men and women's wills, he argues that ties of affection between husband and wife, clearly expressed in those documents, complicated their more traditional loyalties to family and patriline. He then suggests that the increasing size of dowries, and hence the increasing importance of attracting the favor of wealthy women, led to changes in the gender identity—the range of social and emotional behavior considered appropriate for one's gender—of both men and women. As women thus gained influence, social relations changed as well, away from traditional lineage concerns toward more flexible, affective ties of personal loyalty.

Maternity, Widowhood, and Dowry in Florence

CHRISTIANE KLAPISCH-ZUBER

In Florence, men *were* and *made* the "houses." The word *casa* designates, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the material house, the lodging of a domestic unit, and it is in this sense that many documents of a fiscal, legal, or private nature use the term. But it also stands for an entire agnatic kinship group. The *casa* in this case designates all ancestors and living members of a lineage, all those in whose veins the same blood ran, who bore the same name, and who claimed a common ancestor—an eponymic hero whose identity the group had inherited.

"Houses" were made by men. Kinship was determined by men, and the male branching of genealogies drawn up by contemporaries shows how little importance was given, after one or two generations, to kinship through women. Estates also passed from one generation to another through men. Among the goods that men transmitted jealously, excluding women from ownership as far as they could, was the material house, which they "made" also, in the sense that they built it, enlarged it, and filled it with children who bore their name. The Florence of the early Renaissance, the Florence of the great merchants and the first humanists, was not a tenderly feminine city. Family structures and the framework of economic, legal, and political life remained under the control of level-headed males, bastions of solidarity, and family values were inspired by a severely masculine ideal.

In these *case*, in the sense of both [the] physical and the symbolic house, women were passing guests. To contemporary eyes, their movements in relation to the *case* determined their social personality more truly than the lineage group from which they came. It was by means of their physical "entrances" and "exits" into and out of the "house" that their families of origin or of alliance evaluated the contribution of women to the greatness of the *casa*. The marriage that brought a woman out of the paternal house and lineage, the widowhood that often led to her return, these incessant comings and goings of wives between *case* introduced a truly indeterminate quality in the ways they were designated: since reference to a male was necessary, a woman was spoken of in relation to her father or her husband, even when they were dead. It is clear that the mere reference to the name of the lineage into which she was born or into which she married situated a woman much more clearly than the place where she was living at the moment. Women, then, were not permanent elements in the lineage. Memory of them was short. An important woman, a benefactress for her kin, for example, would eventually be known under her own name and brought to people's attention; but the family chronicler or the amateur genealogist would feel obliged to explain *why*, since the process fit so poorly within their definition of kinship. . . .

The determination of a woman's identity thus depended on her movements in

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relation to the "houses" of men. The corollary was that upper-class Florentines found females who remained in their house of birth just as intolerable as females who lived independently. "Honorable" marriages were what regulated the entries and exits of the wives, and the normal state, the state that guaranteed the honor of the women and the "houses," could be no other than the married state. Any woman alone was suspect. An unmarried woman was considered incapable of living alone or in the absence of masculine protection without falling into sin. Even if she were a recluse and lived a holy life, even if she retired to a room on the upper floor of the paternal house, she placed the family honor in jeopardy by the mere fact of her celibacy. The convent was the only way out, although terrible doubts about the security of the cloister continued to torment her parents. Among the "best people," therefore, families did not include females over twenty years of age who were not married.

The widow's solitude was hardly less suspect. Although the Church advised the widow with a penchant for chastity not to remarry and to practice the related virtues of *mater et virgo* [mother and virgin], secular society did not set much store by her chances of remaining chaste. The problem of where the widow was to live became crucial in such a case, for she was a threat to the honor not only of one family but of two. Given that a wife must live where her father or her husband lived (since they were the guarantors of her good conduct and her social identity), where should a wife be when she lost her husband?

ON THE DWELLING PLACE AND THE VIRTUE OF DOWERED WIDOWS

Theoretically, a widow had some choice in the matter. She could live in her husband's family, by her children's side; she could live independently without remarrying, but near her children; or, finally, she could remarry and leave the first family that had received her. But in practice a widow, if young, was barred from the second option and found herself subjected to contradictory pressures that prevented her from quietly choosing between the other two possibilities. Young widows were in fact the target of a whole set of forces struggling fiercely for control of their bodies and their fortunes.

The statistics of the *catasto* (tax survey: see Chapter 3 documents) show that widows in 1427 were much more numerous in the general population than widowers (13.6 percent and 2.4 percent, respectively). In Florence these percentages doubled (25 percent and 4 percent). Widowers tended to be older men (14 percent of the age classes of 70 years old and older were widowers), for men remarried promptly up to a late age. Definitive widowhood came much earlier for women: at 40—that is, at an age at which they might still give children to their new husband—18 percent of Florentine women appear in the census as widows, and at 50, nearly 45 percent do so. Furthermore, according to the statistics on couples drawn from family diaries, two-thirds of the women who became widows before 20 found a new husband, one-third of those widowed between 20 and 29, but only 11 percent of those widowed between 30 and 39—when their numbers grow. We might conclude that after 40 they no longer had much chance of remarrying, while from 75 to 100 percent of all

men up to 60 years of age took another wife. Even if they hoped for remarriage, then, widows' liberty of choice was singularly limited by their age. . . .

Since it is strikingly obvious that a widow's ability to live alone or simply to head the household of her minor children was correlated to her wealth, we need to raise questions concerning the processes that tied her fate to that of the family estate. By processes I mean legal mechanisms as well as individual and collective behavior that affected the widow or motivated her decisions.

It was of course the dowry that tangled the threads of a woman's fate. In principle, the dowered goods that a wife brought her husband were attached to her for life: they had the double function of providing for the expenses of the household and, when the household dissolved at the husband's death, of providing for the surviving wife. Since she could not inherit her father's estate, which went to her brothers, a woman looked to her dowry to assure her subsistence: she could "keep her estate and her honor" before transmitting to her children, male and female, the dowry she had received at marriage. This lovely scheme was unfortunately often belied by the facts. Every widowhood threatened the economic equilibrium the domestic group had achieved during the father's lifetime. If the widow was 40 years old or older, the difficulty of finding her a new husband discouraged her own parents from intervening. It was up to her husband's heirs to persuade her to remain with them and not to "leave with her dowry" to live independently. What is more, her husband would do his utmost, on his deathbed, to encourage her to give up any such idea. He would agree to assure her a lifetime income and supplementary advantages, over and above the income from her own estate, if she would remain under his roof, and he would make his heirs swear to show her all consideration and to consult her in the management of the holdings in which her dowry would continue to be sunk. All of this was not unique to Florence, or to Italy. Clearly, well-off Florentines did succeed in dissuading their wives from flying with their own wings, since there were very few rich and elderly widows who lived independently. If a widow, however, did not get along with her husband's heirs and preferred her freedom, she had no claims other than to her dowry. The suits initiated by widows to regain their dowry show that the heirs did not always see matters her way. In the fifteenth century, however, widows had the law and judicial institutions on their side: if they were not discouraged from the start, they ended up by taking back what they had brought to their marriage.

Finally, if the heirs—who were not always her own children—did not want to keep her under their roof or give her back her dowry, the Florentine widow could fall back on the *torната*, a right of refuge in her family of birth. It was the obligation of her close kin or their heirs to receive her and assure her board and lodging. . . .

These arrangements attest to an anxiety among men—who were deeply committed to maintaining the honor of their "house"—at the thought that a woman of their kin might not be included in a familial group. Even when old, a widow represented a threat to the reputation of good families. Since she had tasted the pleasures of the flesh, she was considered prone, like the hideous merry widow portrayed in Boccaccio's *Corbaccio*, to fall into debauchery. If the heirs let their material interests pass before defense of their honor, the widow's kin, their allied family, felt sufficient responsibility toward her to take her back under their charge—not always without recriminations. Piero di Bernardo Masi, a coppersmith, gave solemn instructions to

his progeny, in 1512, to take all precautions to avoid what had happened to his own father and to get guarantees for the dowries they gave their daughters. For fifteen years—until she died—his father had had to maintain at his own expense a sister whose husband had left her penniless.

In this game, a married woman embodied stakes that were fully revealed only if she was widowed young. Early widowhood revived the claims of the widow's family of birth on the goods brought as a dowry. As these were irrevocably attached, by law, to the physical person of the woman for the duration of her life, widowhood forced her own kin to use her as a pawn by making her "come out" of her husband's family. When she remarried, her family could join a new circle of affines. By the remarriage of a widow of their blood, Florentines affirmed that they had never totally relinquished control over the dowries that they had given their daughters or their sisters. At the same time, they claimed a perpetual right to the women's bodies and their fertility. Marriage alliance did not obliterate blood kinship; it did not signify a definitive break between the wife and her family of origin. When the widow returned to her family of birth and once again became part of its matrimonial strategies, the family took back cards it had already played, with every intention of making the most of a second deal of social prestige bought by the conclusion of a new alliance.

As soon as the husband had been buried and the funeral ceremonies had ended, the wife's kin came to claim her if she was young. They brought her back to their own house: such is "the custom of Florence," Paolo Sasseti says in 1395, and a contemporary asserts that it was less than honorable for the widow to leave before the ceremony, but that it was understood as proper and accepted by all that she do so immediately afterward. The right of families of birth to take back their widows was stronger than the desires the deceased had expressed in his will. The Sasseti "extracted" (the verb *trarre* is used) a sister in 1389, a niece of this same Paolo, and they remarried her promptly, even though she had "three little boys of very young age," for whom her husband had named her guardian and of whose inheritance she had been named coadministrator. But, Paolo Sasseti says, "as we had to marry [Madonna] Isabetta, she could not, and we did not want her to, take on this guardianship, and she renounced it 7 December 1389." The maternal uncles then took over responsibility for their sister's sons.

THE WIDOW'S DEFECTION AND THE ABANDONMENT OF CHILDREN

A departure like Madonna Isabetta's constituted a double threat: to the children of the couple broken up by the death of the father, and to the children of a previous marriage. If their mother or their stepmother left them abruptly for a second marriage, their economic situation underwent a much more brutal shock than when an aged widow demanded her dowry in order to retire where it suited her. The heirs could put many an obstacle in the way of an older widow, for she would find less support from her own kin than if they had decided to remarry her. Remarriage was an honorable objective—so honorable, in fact, that long delays in the restitution of the dowry were frowned upon. For this reason testators who left minor children and

a young widow made every effort to stave off the danger by including many dissuasive stipulations. . . .

"Give a thought, reader," writes one hard-pressed guardian, "of the expenses that have fallen to me in order to satisfy the widows so that they will not abandon their children, especially Neri's widow, who was 25 years old." The remarriage of a widow cast the shadow of a second threat: the abandonment of the children. In fact, the children belonged to the lineage of their father. Thus, boys all their life and girls until their marriage resided with their agnatic kin. Statistics on households, like the daily events chronicled in family journals, show that children rarely stayed for long periods with their maternal kin. If the latter did take them in, they were paid for the children's keep, or they took on management of the children's estates. Since children had no rights to goods that belonged to a lineage not their own. Children who followed their remarried mother were even rarer. The documentation shows that arrangements permitting a widow to establish the children of her first marriage (also with payment of their keep) under the roof of the second husband were usually provisional. Although the stepmother was a very familiar figure in Florentine households, the stepfather was practically unknown.

When a widow left a house in order to remarry, she left with her dowry but without her children. In 1427, many of the tax declarations deplore the abandonment of orphans whose mother had "left the family, taking away her dowry," leaving her husband's heirs in the charge of guardians and of paternal kin. The Florentine family journals, too, overflow in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries with such situations, brutally initiated by the departure of a widow. The paternal kin had to take charge of orphans "of whom it can be said that they are orphaned on both the father's and the mother's side," one Florentine orphan reiterates, "since it can well be said of those who still have a mother that they have none, given the way she has treated them and abandoned them." Giovanni di Niccolao Niccolini left four orphaned children in 1417, and his uncle Lapo notes bitterly that the widow "left the house [with her dowry of 900 *fiornij*] and left her children on the straw, with nothing." When Bartolo di Strozza Rucellai's mother remarried, he threw himself, with his brothers, on the mercy of the tax officials, declaring, "See what a state we are in, without a father and, one could also say, without a mother, having no one else on earth, abandoned by everyone."

Young widows would certainly have to have had singular tenacity and a good deal of courage to resist the contradictory pressures of their two families. . . . Often, widows really did want to remarry. Nevertheless, what contemporary reports emphasize above all is the irresolution of widows, and they leave an impression of widows' abject submission to the demands of their kin. Widows had few legal weapons, their whole upbringing had inculcated docility in them, and only in exceptional circumstances could they avoid remarriage if their relatives had decided in favor of it. The widow of Barna di Valorino Ciurianni, to the immense displeasure of her stepsons, "leaves the house with her dowry" the minute her husband was in the ground, probably with remarriage in mind, since she was young. In spite of her promises to Barna and the advantages assured her in his will, she left her twelve-year-old son in the charge of his half brothers.

Manno di Cambio Petrucci's narration, in 1430, of the days following the death

of his father, who was carried off by the plague, offers a striking example of the anguish to which a widow could be subjected when her brothers wanted her to remarry. We see her here at the age of thirty-four torn between her aunt—probably sent by her family—and her children and stepchildren, who beg her to remain with them. “Madonna Simona,” Manno, the eldest of her stepchildren implores her, “your own children are here. We will treat them as our brothers and you, Madonna Simona, as our mother. Alas! our mother, I beg of you and throw myself at your mercy, for you know our situation. Left without father or mother, if you do not come to our aid we will go headlong into ruin.” The widow, however, bowed to her family’s wishes: “I will do what my family decides,” she says, and Manno adds, “for Madonna Pipa, her aunt, had done her job well overnight.” It is a poignant tale, and one in which the children’s dismay at the threat of being abandoned is expressed in protestations of respect and fidelity. The children avoid frankly broaching the question of what was most at stake in the conflict, however: the dowry that they might have to give back. Manno admits as much once the break was irreversible: “If Madonna Simona had agreed to remain with us, we would not have had to sell our things at half their price, wasting our substance so that we could give her back some of her dowry.”

“GOOD MOTHERS” AND “CRUEL MOTHERS”

... The “cruel mother” was the woman who left her young children, but it was above all the mother who “left with her dowry.” There is no better evidence of this than this same Giovanni Morelli, who lived a good part of his childhood and adolescence in his stepfather’s house, brought up by the very mother whom he nevertheless accuses of having “abandoned” him. The abandonment was economic as much as affective, and what abandoned children complained of explicitly was the financial implications of their mother’s remarriage. The mother who deserted the roof under which her children lived placed the interests of her own lineage and her own family above her children’s interests, and that is why she was stigmatized. The clearest reproaches on the part of children or children’s guardians rarely dwell on anything other than this consequence of remarriage.

The positive image, that of the “good mother,” shows a *contrario*, the range of functions that the “cruel mother” who left to remarry failed to fulfill. There is truly no “good mother” who is not “both mother and father.” This is the widow who refuses to remarry, no matter how young she might be, “in spite of the oburgations of her entire family,” “so as not to abandon her children,” “in order not to lead them to ruin,” and who is both “a father and a mother for her children.” Just like the father, she assured, by her stability, a transmission that was first and foremost a transmission of material goods, without which there was no family. “Remaining,” “staying,” “living with” her children, bequeathing them the wealth that was theirs—such was the primary paternal obligation in a system of residence and transmission of patrimony organized by patrilineal filiation. The virtues of an exceptional mother are from this point of view all manly virtues.

The widow qualified as a “good mother” was also one who devoted herself to the upbringing of her children with firmness and discipline. Perhaps she could not com-

pete with the father on the terrain of pedagogy. She could not offer a boy all the models of behavior that a father offered his sons, and her inexperience in public and political life constituted a vexing handicap. Her culture was often limited, and worse yet, she was unable to transmit to her sons the values and the spiritual heritage of the lineage, to talk to them of “what happened to their ancestors and of their actions, of those from whom they had received gifts and services and those by whom they had been badly used, of who was their friend in need and, conversely, the vendettas they had engaged in and of recompenses given to those to whom they were obliged.” A uniquely maternal upbringing had lacunae and was necessarily incomplete. Nevertheless, if undertaken with constancy and rigor, it could be comparable to the education administered by a father. When widowhood precluded other choices, the “good mother” was an acceptable substitute for the father. The “love” she bore her orphaned children took its full value from its masculine connotations.

Conversely, the bad mother, the “cruel mother,” violated the values and the interests of her children’s lineage when she showed too much docility toward her family of birth. In this she demonstrated the traditional vices of woman in exaggerated form. “Inconstant,” “light,” “flighty,” she swings from one family to the other, she “forgets” her children and the husband she has just buried to seek pleasure in the bed of a second husband; she shifts shamelessly between the rigid structures of the contending masculine lineages. There is no doubt that the growing misogyny and mistrust of women at the dawn of the Renaissance were reinforced by structural contradictions that made it difficult to combine dotal system with patrilinearity. Among jurists, moralists, and those who reflected on the family, stereotypes presented woman as avid and capricious, eager to appropriate male inheritances for herself or other women, without pity for her children, whom she abandoned the moment she was widowed; a creature inconstant in her family loyalties, of immoderate attachments and inordinate sexuality, insatiable, and a menace to the peace and honor of families. In short, a creature intent on destroying the “houses” that men had constructed. . . .

Few contemporaries grasped the reasons for these tensions and tried to look beyond their lineage-inspired and antifeminist prejudices. One, however, puts a fine defense of remarried widows into the mouth of a young Florentine. In the *Paradiso degli Alberti*, written around 1425 by Giovanni Gherardi of Prato, a courtly discussion arises among a group of people of polite society. The problem posed is whether paternal love or maternal love is the better. One young man argues heatedly that mothers are not worth much since, contrary to fathers, they abandon their children. In any event, as they are inferior beings, their love could not possibly be as “perfect” as that of men. One young woman “of great wit and of most noble manners” is then charged by the women to respond to him. She cleverly turns his arguments against him by placing herself in his logic: since women are less “perfect” than men, they must obey men and follow them; and “since [women] cannot take their children, nor keep them with them, and they cannot remain alone without harm, especially if they are young, nor remain without masculine protection, it is almost perforce that mothers see themselves constrained to choose the best compromise. But it is not to be doubted that they think constantly of their children and remain strongly attached to them in spite of this separation.”

In this demonstration the young woman throws back to her male interlocutor the very contradictions in which he—along with the whole society of his time—let himself be trapped. For how could the “honor” and the “status” of a lineage be increased by taking back a woman and her dowry in order to give them elsewhere, without offending the honor and the standing of the family to which she had given children? How could such a family reassert its rights over the person and the wealth of a woman without depriving another family of those rights? How could the separation of mother and child be avoided when the mother’s identity was always borrowed and the child could belong only to his paternal kin? How could a woman be reproached for her docility before men when society denied her economic and legal autonomy?

But the young woman’s words go farther. When she evokes the mother’s attachment to her children—an attachment that the males of her time either failed to express, rejected, or sublimated into “paternal love,” according to whether they stood on one side or the other of the dowry fence—our clever Florentine exposes the mechanisms by which a society that manipulated woman and the wealth attached to her attempted to prove its own innocence by reinforcing the image of the insensitive and destructive female.

Wives and Husbands in Late Medieval Venice

STANLEY CHOJNACKI

In December 1445 Valerio Zeno and Vittoria Vitturi, a Venetian patrician husband and wife, summoned a notary to draw up their wills. In his will, written December 2, Valerio designated Vittoria as his sole executor and, acknowledging his obligation to return her dowry of twenty-four hundred ducats to her, instructed that she was to inherit all his other goods as well, whether she remarried or not. He made a point of underscoring this intention, anticipating “impediments or opposition” to Vittoria’s inheritance from his agnatic kinsmen, who would be reluctant to see his property escape them, especially if Vittoria should remarry (as, in the event, she did, twice). Still, that he favored his wife over kin did not signal alienation from his lineage, for he asked to be buried “in our tomb of Ca’ Zeno at SS. Giovanni e Paolo.” In her will nineteen days later, Vittoria reciprocated by making Valerio her sole executor and universal heir [the heir to the estate after all specific bequests have been fulfilled]—except for one other bequest, a four-hundred-ducat dowry contribution to a daughter of Valerio’s late brother, Basilio Zeno. This generous bequest surprisingly shows Vittoria more beneficent toward her husband’s kin than he himself was and indeed more than she was to her own natal family, which then included one brother

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with a son just entering adulthood. Yet although like Valerio she favored her spouse over her kinsmen in tangible bequests, also like him she wanted to be buried “in the tomb where my father, *Dominus Andrea* [Vitturi], and my mother are buried.”

The wills of Valerio and Vittoria Zeno, fairly typical examples of the genre, expose the rich complexity of social relations among married patricians in late medieval Venice. They show married people’s enduring loyalty to family and lineage of origin, expressed here in the symbolically weighty choice of burial sites, but they also show deep trust and generosity between husband and wife. Such strong bonds between spouses had the potential to subvert other, older loyalties, notably those to the natal clan. The Zeno wills, and others like them, however, reveal that married patricians did not always face a sharp either/or choice between natal and marital family. Rather, they inhabited a dense interwoven thicket of social and psychological relationships, through which they navigated in a variety of ways, limited by the constraints of individual circumstance but also following the urgings of individual desires. Family and lineage ties were important, as was calculation of personal interest, but affection also figured in married people’s choices in bestowing loyalty and largesse. In the following pages I make an initial foray into the uncharted realm of affection between spouses, with special concern for its place in patricians’ overall social orientation. I pay particular attention to husbands’ regard for their wives, for there are signs that husbandly affection deepened in the fifteenth century. This development appears to have been influenced by an increase in the status and power of women in patrician society. At the same time, it contributed toward expanding still further women’s influence—economic, social, and cultural.

On the whole, the literature on marriage among the late medieval and Renaissance Italian elites has tended to emphasize, properly and profitably, its alliance aspect, viewing marriage as an instrument of family and lineage strategy, a means of promoting the family’s status and advancing its interests. . . . Such family-centered concerns were manifestly important, but emphasis on alliances can give the impression that marriage had little to do with the personalities or even identities of the spouses, who figure in this picture chiefly as instruments of family interest, especially the teenaged brides (grooms, in contrast, often took part in marriage negotiation). When we stress alliances, too, we take a perspective that shows all parties—contracting families, spouses, even children—operating chiefly, if not solely, from calculated interest.

Although marriage was an important vehicle of patricians’ family and individual interest, attention to alliances did not necessarily preclude intense relations between spouses. Indeed, it would be surprising if close bonds did not often develop. As instruments of family strategy, spouses might be drawn to each other by mutual sympathy. For that matter, family strategy encouraged good relations between the two joined links as a guarantee of the alliance’s enduring success. Over the course of years and decades of proximity and intimacy, during which the contours of their families were constantly being reshaped and their shared experiences accumulating in scope and complexity, husbands and wives could develop feelings of companionship, loyalty, and affection for one another. A full picture of marriage must consequently consider husband-wife relations over time. The interfamilial dimension is important, but so are the years after the bride and groom were thrown willy-nilly into connubial