



2009-11-24

# The Covenant: How the Tension and Interpretation Within Puritan Covenant Doctrine Pushes Toward More Equality in English Marriage

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The Covenant: How the Tension and Interpretation  
within Puritan Covenant Doctrine Pushes toward  
More Equality in English Marriage

Maren H. Miyasaki

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Masters of English

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December 2009

## ABSTRACT

The Covenant: How the Tension and Interpretation  
within Puritan Covenant Doctrine Pushes toward  
More Equality in English Marriage

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Master of English

The Puritans constituted a very vocal influential minority during the time of Shakespeare. One of their more interesting ideas was the doctrine of the covenant, which explained why a transcendent God would care for fallen human beings. God, for Puritans, voluntarily bound himself in a covenant to man. The interrelations of elements of grace and works make it difficult to interpret what a covenant should be like: more like a modern contract or more like a feudalistic promise system? Unlike a contract, God never ends the covenant even when humans disregard their commitment, but instead helps humans fulfill their obligations by means of mercy. The covenant also sets out specific limitations that each party is required to fulfill like a contract. Puritans applied this pattern of the covenant not only to their relationship with God, but to other relationships like business, government, and most interestingly marriage. I will focus on how Shakespeare sets out this same covenantal pattern between man and God in his depiction in Portia's and in Helena's marriages respectively. I use sixteenth and seventeenth century Puritan treatises and sermons as well as secondary experts to illustrate Shakespeare's invocation of a Puritan marriage. This Puritan interpretation of the marriage covenant points toward equality by making the couple equally obligated in the contract, yet requiring more than mere obligation. These authors believed that the marriage covenant should not just be for procreation, but cohabitation and communion of the mind.

Keywords: Shakespeare, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Merchant of Venice*, puritan, covenant

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My great appreciation goes out to Dr. Rick Duerden, who was willing to take on my project and always push me to be clearer and think deeper. I would also like to thank Dr. Brandie Siegfried, who really held my hand that first semester and helped me stumble into the idea as well as being willing to help me with the paper that was the precursor to this one. I also appreciate Dr. Bruce Young who also helped me as a reader and mentor to bounce ideas off of. Both were very willing to review my work and sit on my committee.

I am grateful to my parents for instilling in me a love of reading and a thirst for knowledge. I want to thank my friends and colleagues who helped me work through ideas. I especially want to thank my older brother Joel, who is always willing to read and rip apart my writing, for without his persona to compete with and without him taking this academic path before me, I might not have pursued this avenue and completed this project.

BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

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of a thesis submitted by

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## Introduction

Early modern Puritan theologians and theorists developed covenant theology as a rationale for why an “absolute, incomprehensible, and transcendent...God” (Gordis 387) or Calvinistic God would create or care about humans. The rationale for Puritans, a non-separatist movement within the Calvinist Protestants, was that God “voluntarily, of His own sovereign will and choice, consented to be bound and delimited by a specific program” (387). Perry Miller, in his 1939 book *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century*, provides a rationale for and history of covenant thought even though he overly emphasizes the covenant as a covenant of works. Miller explains that Puritans did not create this theory any more than any sect created original sin. Instead the Puritans, in an effort to “preserve the truths already known,” considered covenant theory a part of their theological canon that always existed, but not previously “emphasized” (366). The early initiators of this thought were, according to Miller, William Tyndale and William Perkins, but they were closely followed by William Ames, John Preston, Richard Sibbes, John Ball, Robert Baxter, and John Gale. These Puritan thinkers used biblical proof from Genesis and Paul’s writings as well as classical ideas from Aristotle and Cicero to substantiate this doctrine, which they believed was a revival of old ideas or knowledge (365). While the word *covenant* for Puritans could refer to ordinances like baptism and the Eucharist, I will be dealing with covenant as the pact between man and God. Calvinists who preached about an all-powerful god were reacting against the Arminians and Antinomians who believed God’s grace depended on man’s will (368). Puritanism was also reacting against the remaining Catholic or “popish” influences, which emphasized how fallen man could only be saved by grace. Puritans sought to put salvation back within the realm of man’s power while justifying why an all-powerful God would create or care about humans. Miller and others describe this covenant

tension where God retains his sovereignty over men, but men voluntarily enter into a bargain of God's making. Covenant theory interestingly not only influenced Puritan thought and action, but also influenced the thoughts of the general population as this vocal minority pushed English society toward class and gender equality.

This push toward gender equality for women comes when people take this covenant relationship with God and apply it to other relationships, especially marriage. The marriage relationship exhibits a similar tension, particularly for Puritans, about how to interpret the doctrine of the covenant. Writers interpreted the significance of the covenant for women by either advocating more equality within marriage or by encouraging women to step out of assigned gender roles to comply with their covenant obligations, which in turn created more equality. This influence can be seen not only in the literature of known Puritan followers like John Milton, but also in the works of other writers often considered more religiously neutral or ambiguous like Shakespeare. John Milton's and his contemporaries' work demonstrate this idealized push for equality emerging from their understanding of covenant theory. Shakespeare also felt the influence of Puritan covenant doctrine pushing toward equality. I will compare Bassanio and Portia's marriage in *The Merchant of Venice* to Bertram and Helena's marriage in *All's Well that Ends Well*; I will specifically explore how Portia and Helena step outside of their preconceived gender roles as well as go beyond the bounds of the marriage contract in order to fulfill their covenantal responsibilities toward their spouses, these actions pushed toward more equitable relationship with their husbands.

Before exploring its implications within Shakespeare's texts, I will first explore the different ways theorists and historians have interpreted the idea of covenant. This exploration helps readers see how the Puritan interpretation and even the tensions among different



interpretations appear in literary examples. Early Puritans like Perkins and later Ames emphasize God's ultimate control over the covenant, with its status as “free bountie,” gift, or grace given to the humble, rather than just a bargain or contract (*A Golden Chaine* 40). Lisa Gordis explains that those Puritans who thought along the lines of the covenant as a promise believed that no matter how you packaged the covenant, it still remained a gift from an omnipotent god. This put an emphasis on grace and humility rather than on free will and human responsibility. Perkins in part of his 1600 work, *A Golden Chaine*, explains that all should be humble like David who expresses his unworthiness when asking, “who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to offer willingly on this sort: for all things come of thee, and of thine owne hand we haue giuen thee” (40). Humanity, according to these theologians, never completely fulfilled its end of the covenant. So while the idea of covenant institutes ideas of mutual obligation like a contract and free will, this interpretation focuses more on the covenant as a gift or promise from God to reward for little deserving action on humanity’s side. Puritans also believed this implies that God could break the covenant but will not, retaining a sense of grace and humility on humanity’s side.

From reading theologians of the time like Perkins and Tyndale, more recent theorists, like Miller, believe that Puritans during the Renaissance interpreted the covenant mainly as a covenant of works similar to a contract. The language of contract came from business, and as in a business deal, each party had to fulfill their part. This interpretation puts more of an emphasis on human freedom and responsibility. Perkins also outlines the covenant in more contractual terms:

God’s couenant, is his contract with man, concerning life eternall, vpon certaine conditions. This couenant consisteth of two parts: God’s promise to man, Mans promise to God. Gods promise to man, is that, whereby he bindeth himselfe to

man to bee his God, if he breake not the condition. Mans promise to God, is that, whereby he voweth his allegiance vnto his Lord, and to performe the condition betweene them. (*A Golden Chaine* 37)

Puritans who focused on this interpretation, perhaps unintentionally, moved away from Calvinist notions of predestination which left everything up to grace. Instead, they believed that works in accordance with covenantal conditions were important as well. The scholar Richard Strier also believes that the covenant acted more as a contract than a promise. Strier argues that “the contract replaces the promise . . . as the central form of divine self-expression” (87). Historian William Clebsch also suggests the influence of the development of covenantal theology when he argues that the “covenant-contract theology crystallized in Tyndale’s mind” (203). These critics and historians, like Clebsch, focus on how God in the Testaments set out laws about “what men may or may not do” (203). Many historians and critics interpret the words of Perkins and similar Puritans in this contractual manner as creating a sense of contractual obligation that both must fulfill, but only to a certain point.

The idea of covenant inherently contains two supposedly opposing interpretations that Puritans could not escape. The appearance of both interpretations in Puritan texts and literature can create some ambiguity and confusion, but negotiating the interpretations creates equality. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the concept of *covenant* as “a compact, contract, bargain, [or a] . . . promise.” This fourteenth-to nineteenth-century definition also points out that the word can have legal or theological associations (*OED*). Looking at definitions from the same time period of *contract* and *promise* unlocks other nuances of covenant. *Contracts* involve mutual legal agreements, but also marriage agreements, while a *promise* involves assurances to others (*OED*). Contracts spell out specific legal conditions or requirements that each party must

accomplish no matter how harsh and exacting the requirements or kind and beneficial the results; both parties have mutual obligations up to a point. When each party fulfills those requirements the contract ends, unlike promises, which may require more.

Contracts can often be treated like promises, but promises cannot be treated like contracts, so the debate about the interpretation seemed important to people then as well as scholars today. Miller emphasizes the idea that a covenant is both contract and a promise when he declares that

Because a man takes a covenant upon himself, it is the strongest tie by which he can ever be bound. In a covenant he is infinitely more liable than in a promise, more obligated than by a law, more involved than in a testament, more answerable than for his oath. An oath may attest a mistake, but a covenant guarantees truth. A promise calls for some future good, a law for some performance, but a covenant calls for both. (375)

God voluntarily subjects himself to a contract, but gives more than a contract on his side. He also has the power to end the contract, but chooses not to. In fact, often when God should end the covenant with men for not meeting the contractual or mutual obligation specified, he waits for people to meet their end or helps them fulfill the covenant. Man retains the image of free will because they voluntarily enter the covenant. For Puritans, God required few obligations, but eventually invited his followers to go beyond their obligations taking on more and mercifully helping others. More obligation or responsibility invited Puritan believers to become slightly more equal with God or to resemble him in some ways.

No matter how much one theologian or theorist emphasized the covenant as contract over promise or promise over contract, ultimately they could not escape the idea that the covenant for most Puritans involved both, which I also espouse. For example, above we saw how Perkins's

writings seem to contain both ideas of promise and contract in his conception of covenant.

Puritans moved away from predestination to emphasize that humans hold responsibility for their actions, but as Von Rohr, a religious theorist, suggests there still was an “element of contingency in the divine-human relationship” (1). Von Rohr sees this philosophical tug-of-war between the idea of works and contract or grace and promise as the “basic tension in Puritan thought” (1).

Another theorist John S. Coolidge might interpret this as the difference within “Federal theology” that says the covenant includes a covenant of grace and works that are separate, but each include one another (169). Puritans believed that humans voluntarily followed the contingents set out by God’s word (Gordis 391). God committed to fulfill his side of the covenant and more when humans fulfilled theirs. Even so, Puritans “saw ultimate human destiny as divinely and unconditionally determined by God's decree” (391). This interpretation moves away from translating the covenant as just a covenant of grace or just a covenant of works, but with elements of both. God voluntarily subjects himself to a contract, but fulfills more than contractual obligations on his side. God could, but will not escape or end the contract while men would like to, but cannot escape or end the contract until they fulfill their responsibilities. For a chosen people that meant that they must meet the requirements of the contract, but were also continually invited to go beyond its initial specifications and show mercy as opposed to justice. The covenant, according to this interpretation, is more than a contract. Both of these elements seem to have existed in the covenant, but instead of choosing one or the other Puritans negotiated the delicate space of emphasizing and living both at the same time.

The covenant, as expounded by Puritan thinkers, puts humans on a somewhat equal level with God because of its connection with contractual thinking, which temporarily levels the hierarchy between the two. Richard Strier purports that God’s obligation or binding to man

implies “some level of equality” (101-02). Religion acted as the system or framework that people used to order their lives and relate to one another. The covenant idea that Puritans applied to their relationship and conception of God, they also applied to their relationship and conception of relations like marriage. This invited men, in their covenant with God, and women, in their covenant of marriage, to go beyond their normal roles and take a more active position in their covenantal relationships. The works of the time did not completely escape hierarchy, the dominant system now known as patriarchy or the idea of the great chain of being, but often leveled the hierarchy by emphasizing the ideas of equality or respect over those that kept women and men in the submissive position. For example, theologian William Perkins advocates “making account of her [women], as his companion, or yoke-fellow. For this cause, the woman, when she was created, was not taken out of the mans head, because she was not made to rule ouer him; nor out of his feet, because God did not make her subiect to him as a seruant; but out of his side, to the end that man should take her as his mate” (*A Christian Oeconomie* 125). While not completely escaping the hierarchy created by taking Eve out of Adam’s side, Perkins suggests that Eve was not Adam’s lord or servant, but equal. William Gouge, also from this period, levels the hierarchy some by presenting marriage as a partnership between senior and junior partners (Johnson 110). Thomas Gataker, in his treatise, goes further, presenting marriage as a completely mutual relationship or friendship (32). Throughout, the Puritan discourses tend not to emphasize man as the ruler of women, but employ the language of equality and respect rather than subservience. For just as God made man “a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour” (Psalms 8: 5) woman was meant as Adam’s “help meet” (Genesis 2:18) or “in the image of God created he him; male and female” (Genesis 1:27). While Paul does explain that God is man’s head as man is woman’s head, he also suggests that each should show

benevolence and have power over the body of the other. Equality comes from giving each party agency to enter, to prescribe, to fulfill, and to end the pact. Critic James Johnson explicates his point of view of the covenantal relationship as “true contracts of mutual obligation of the relationships between ruler and people and between husband and wife” (116). Puritans saw that God had intentionally drafted the covenant as a contract on humanity’s side. Such a contract felt like a bond with God, a partnership which was not, in business terms, a limited partnership, but even better, an unlimited partnership—a partnership with One who is absolutely superior, but also absolutely on one’s side. God required only a contract from men, extending the courtesy of equality if not the actuality of equality.

Both Michael McGiffert and Perry Miller address another concern within Puritan covenant theory. They caution us to recognize that few Puritans concentrated on or applied covenant theory to other relationships like marriage or government as an active or political force. McGiffert in “Covenant, Crown, and Commons in Elizabeth Puritanism” declares that although “Puritans of the Elizabethan era made something of covenant doctrine in their theological writings, they rarely put it to political use” because it usually backfired (32). McGiffert explains that this idea did not become a true form of contract theory until the seventeenth century (33). Similarly, it did not spark a feminist movement. Miller also explains that “only a restricted group even of English Puritans concentrated their thinking upon it” (366). The concept of the covenant descended from Puritanism as an idea, not an active movement, but it was an idea that shaped social relationships as other critics have noted. Instead of beginning social contract theory or a political movement, it motivated personal and church purification, leading Puritans to reflect the covenant in their outward relationship with others.

A Puritan marriage, as James Johnson explains, resisted the mode of being just a partnership like a contract or a hierarchical relationship, but “charts out a field for conjugal relationships in the area between them” (109). This shows that Puritans were maneuvering within the marriage relationship just as they maneuvered within their covenant relationship, carefully interpreting them as both a contract and a promise. Because the covenant relationship often was expressed through marriage rhetoric, this idea easily transferred. The Puritans’ vocal theological musings in the 1600 to 1650s, when the idea of the covenant was developing, took hold of the general population’s thoughts, and their influence can be identified in the writings of Shakespeare and later writings. It is my contention that the perceived covenantal relationship with God influenced the peoples’ conception of marriage, framing it as a more companionate and mutual conception, which in turn appeared within Shakespeare’s writing and later writing. These works also helped further the Puritan ideas into the mainstream. When women, especially in their marriage relationships, took more responsibility in the marriage covenant or decided to follow God’s example of extending mercy by going beyond specifications, they were stepping out of their normal gender roles and pushing toward equality, making men more willingly recognize them as equal. This model of marriage contrasts to the Catholic model of marriage still remaining and echoing in the Book of Common Prayer as a fallen institution for beings who could not remain celibate and virtuous. Marriage retained sacramental status in this tradition until the Second Vatican Council in 1966 introduced covenantal language (Witte and Nichols 21). More extreme Puritans in the document “A View of Popish Abuses Yet Remaining in the English Church, 1572” complain that the ring made the woman an idol to be worshipped or honored, which was inappropriate except with God. Only God and grace could cleanse the marriage. By contrast, the Puritan conception of marriage incorporated grace and works and saw

marriage as an exalted state. I specifically will be looking, as I suggested, at Portia's and Helena's actions within their marriage covenant.

Exploring the role of Puritan covenant theory and its effect on women leads us to delve into a significant place within Shakespeare scholarship. A few historians, as opposed to literary critics, have discovered covenant theory's application to marriage. Literary critics in the past usually only look at Christianity's general effect, like M. D. H. Parker and E. M. W. Tillyard looks at how Christianity can bring hope to tragedy or who examined the role of justice in Shakespeare's plays. R.L. Smallwood specifically looks at how Shakespeare's ending gives Bertram time for self examination and repentance in *All's Well that Ends Well*, but except for Juliet Dusinberre, no one particularly looks at Puritan doctrinal influence. Dusinberre specifically explores how Puritans introduced new ideals of marriage that include chastity for both men and women that gave playwrights like Shakespeare material. Puritans also encouraged a healthy debate and examination in society. What Dusinberre and others do not specifically look at is how Puritan covenant ideas act as the driving force behind this new idea of women in marriage and how it translates to the plays.

Many do examine the role of women and marriage in the Renaissance with conflicting views. Recent critics see Shakespeare in two different veins. Some critics see Shakespeare's treatment of gender in a negative light like Linda Bamber, Derek Cohen, and David McCandless and critics like Stevie Davies, Shirley Nelson Garner, Peter Erickson, B.J. Pendlebury, Anne Parten, and Sarup Singh. Bamber, Cohen, and McCandless, see Shakespeare's men treating women as the Other or an object while Davies, Garner, Erickson, Parten, and Singh see Shakespeare confirming the system known as patriarchy and the double standard. A few critics see Shakespeare in a more positive way like Martha Andersen-Thom and Irene Dash, who



believe Shakespeare uses his writing to critique the system known as patriarchy, or those like Keith Geary and R.B. Parker, who believe that women characters were rebelling or becoming masculine or violent to rule their spouses. I align more with those like Marianne Novy who see a tension between patriarchy and sexual equality affecting the plays. Also I build on the work of critics like Juliet Dusinberre and Michael L. Stapleton. These critics find a push toward feminism and gender blurring within Shakespeare's plays as the result of Puritan doctrine. Bruce Young and some critics dispute the idea of harsh hierarchal marriages, discussing how marriages conveyed "a vision of potentially loving mutuality and happiness that many of Shakespeare's contemporaries would have shared" ("The Holy Cords" 26). I follow this vein of thinking, examining how Shakespeare's writing, influenced by the doctrine of the Puritan covenant, pushed toward equality and mutuality within marriage, displacing the patriarchal system. I am looking at how the standard or rationale of the covenant that these couples were trying to live up to results in positive portrayals of equality.

#### How Puritan Covenant Theory Creates Equality in Portia's and Helena's Marriages

The results of interpreting a transcendent God bound to a covenant like a contract implies equality with humanity (Strier 101-02). Like God, humans often must go beyond their mutual obligations to fulfill the covenant or require more responsibility from their partners creating equal standards for both partners. While the pattern of the covenant originally applied only to men's obligation to God and his obligation to men, for Puritans it was also taken farther and applied to other relationships, most remarkably marriage. Many religious historians like James Johnson, Michael McGiffert, Amanda Porterfield, and others note how marriage was seen as a covenant. Johnson purports that the Puritan marriage doctrine results from applying "covenant thinking to...marital union" (108). This covenant between man and woman in marriage

simulated the covenant between man and God and even king and subjects. In fact, considering the way that the covenant with God was often, by the Bible and by Puritan works, expressed as the relationship of a bride with the bridegroom, the application was natural. McGiffert and Porterfield both express how the image of the covenant as Christ's marriage to his Church served as "symbolic representation of the marriages that Puritan men and women understood to be the basis of Puritan society" (Porterfield 206). McGiffert notes that the kind of model that emerged for marriages emphasized mutuality without displacing male supremacy ("Grace and Works" 497). Marriage for Puritans aspired to escape the stereotypes of the time while not displacing them.

God made a covenant with the house of Israel, which as Puritans believed simulated the same in marriage. Perkins argues in *Golden Chaine* that this agreement puts God in a position like "a husband to them, saith the Lord. But this shall be the couenant, that I will make with the house of Israel: after those daies, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts, and will be their God, and they shall be my people. The couenant of works, is Gods couenant, made with condition of perfect obedience, and is expressed in the morall law" (36-37). Real marriage was based on mutual work and responsibility. Johnson believes that the basis of marriage comes in examining Genesis 2:18, which gives Adam his wife Eve so that he would not be alone and so she could be a "help meet." As Johnson explains it, the contractual obligations that the covenant requires are "mutual help" in daily as well as spiritual matters (108) implying intellectual and spiritual equality. Johnson also believes that "Puritan treatises and sermons on marriage" like Perkins's *Christian Oeconomie* and Gataker's sermons set out more explicitly what these covenantal specifications of mutual help entail, as either equal or close partners in the same venture (109). Russ McDonald also suggests that Puritans pushed this

humanist “ideal of companionate marriage” and that the seed was seen as early as Elizabeth’s reign and in Shakespeare’s comedies (262). This impulse appears compellingly within Portia’s and Helena’s marriages and actions evolving to an almost modern conception of equality in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and other later works.

On a greater level, the marriage covenant also inspired early feminist and democratic ideas and impulses by helping establish more mutual relationships. Specifically the covenant and these works show the encouragement of a single standard of virtue for both men and women of chastity and moral excellence. While there was not an active revolt especially by women, Susan Wabuda posits that these ideas helped to subtly adjust “the roles of women and men inside an ancient frame ... a greater emphasis upon spiritual equality as it was lived through marriage” combining previous ideas of submission with more elements of friendship (128). The covenant encourages marriage between intellectual and spiritual equals, which implies the need for education and intellectual discovery in both sexes. This creates, as James Johnson suggests, the ability of both parties within a marriage covenant to end the covenant for noncompliance, freely violate the terms of the covenant, or demand from their partner equal power or responsibility, sometimes by overstepping traditional bounds (116). When women treat their marriage as more than a contract they incorporate grace or overstep their gender roles to help their spouses fulfill their side of the covenant. This overstepping or more active stance in their marriage creates more equality as it makes their spouse see them in a different light as more capable or similar to man. It also gives women a chance to carve out their own place within the relationship.

Before discussing how Shakespeare plays with these Puritan themes of covenant in his depiction of women in marriage, readers must understand why Shakespeare would be familiar with these Puritan themes. During the Renaissance, religion was inseparable from all other parts

of life. David Cressy and Lori Anne Ferrell suggest that “The pattern of the cosmos, the history and destiny of the world, and the ordering of social, political, and domestic relationships were all explained in biblical and theological terms” (1). Religion would have colored all aspects of Shakespeare’s life and serve as the pattern that English people of the time used to negotiate and explain all their relationships. We can assume a significant Puritan influence starting from Shakespeare’s childhood. For example, the orders to rid England of popery by transforming the churches and cathedrals into stark Protestant houses of worship led to Stratford’s Guild Chapel and Holy Trinity Church being white washed and all its iconography stripped and destroyed in Shakespeare’s youth (Wilson 28). Dusinger notes “it is absurd to imagine that the Puritan spirit, which has had such a vast influence on English life, rubbed off on Spenser but left no traces on a man earning his living by entertaining a city buzzing with Puritan activity” (307). Shakespeare’s popularity corresponded with the time known as the Puritans’ heyday with Puritans actively putting out propaganda, filling the press, and publicly speaking. Shakespeare showed his knowledge of and sympathy toward Puritan ideals with his attitude on women and friendship. Dusinger also suggests that Shakespeare does not especially separate “human nature into the masculine and feminine, but observed in the individual woman or man an infinite variety of union between opposing impulses” (308). Shakespeare did not create the distinctions of inferiority in his woman characters that many at the time were apt to make. Shakespeare allows his female characters, like Portia and Helena, to think and act equally to his male characters. These were ideas associated with Puritan influence and doctrine.

Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* shows examples of how contemporaries thought of the covenantal relationship, most notably between husband and wife. Samuel Ajzenstat interestingly comments on the state of life involving the conditional and unconditional saying, that “The play

shows us that the life of purely unconditional relationships, however exalted it may be, is unreachable and the attempt to reach it corrupting, but it resists a complacent reaction to the realization that this is how things must be. In a grand tradition, perhaps now on the wane, it is profoundly anti-utopian without quite letting us give up longing for a purer world” (263).

Ajzenstat believes that the hope for the unconditional is unattainable or corrupting. I would suggest replacing the words *contract* for *conditional* and *promise* for *unconditional*. I also believe and explore how one does not exclude the other. Karen Newman also believes that both elements exist.

First, I will examine how Shakespeare sets up the marriage covenant between Portia and Bassanio in contractual terms. While this is a marriage of love, the initial terms of the contract are set up by Portia’s father. Portia, at the beginning, laments the fact that she may not “choose one, nor refuse none” (I.ii.26). Nevertheless, her maid Nerissa reassures Portia that her “father was ever virtuous, and holy men at their death have good inspirations; therefore the lott’ry that he has devis’d in these three chests of gold, silver, and lead who chooses his meaning chooses you, will no doubt never be chosen but rightly by one who you shall rightly love” (I.ii.27-33). While Portia’s father sets up the initial terms of the contract with a lottery, Nerissa believes this will also be a marriage of love and possibly equality for Portia. A respectful parent would never set up a marriage otherwise. This is in accordance with the ideas of William Perkins, who expresses commonly held covenantal Puritan ideas in his treatise *Christian Oeconomie*, which set up consent as part of the marriage contract, but this consent can be “either of the man and the woman, or of their parents” (69). Consent between the two parties is essential, but can include respecting or yielding to a parent’s wishes. Within her marriage covenant Portia respects her father’s wishes, but also looks for equality and respect.

Although she might aspire for such covenantal equalities to a lesser degree than Helena, Portia and Bassanio seem to share a bond of love that Helena and Bertram lack. Perkins's *Christian Oeconomie* sets up the four purposes or ends of marriage as "procreation of children, for the propagation and continuance of the seed and posteritie of man vpon the earth" (13); "procreation of an holy seed, wherby the Church of God may be kept holy and chaste" (13); "meanes to auoid fornication, and consequently to subdue and slake the burning lusts of the flesh" (14); and "that the parties married may thereby performe the duties of their callings, in better and more comfortable manner" (14). While Shakespeare may not have read Perkins' work, he would have read or been familiar with similar Puritan treatises and ideas such as Tyndale's and Calvin's. These treatises set up the marriage purposes as contractual obligations recognized and required for both partners, so Shakespeare's characters would have recognized these as their marital obligations. Bassanio willingly and eagerly fulfills most of these commonly associated obligations of marriage in procreation, spiritual teaching and leadership, avoiding fornication, but not in working together. Bassanio, even though he loves Portia or the idea of Portia, sees her as a prize or an idealized object and not an equal. While Bassanio first expresses how Portia is "fair and, fairer than that word, / Of wondrous virtue" (I.i.162-63), he also points out that she is rich and refers to her hair as a "golden fleece" (I.i.170). Bassanio also relates to the casket trial as "one of two contending in a prize" (III.ii.141). Alluding to Portia as a fleece or an object of conquest makes it hard for Bassanio to see her, at first, as anything more. Bassanio may appreciate her good qualities as well as her money, but he has not realized that love must make her more than an object. As a duty of the husband, Perkins in his treatise *Christian Oeconomie* elaborates that a husband must love and honor his wife. As already discussed, honor included the idea of not only avoiding tyranny, but allowing equality. Wives should openly advise or

admonish their husbands. In her idealized state, Bassanio cannot let Portia do any of those actions because she represents the fleece he has won from all the other “Jasons” (I.ii.172).

When Portia, who has been the master of her house since her father died, gives up her possessions to her new husband Bassanio, she also gives him her ring, saying that “when you part from, lose, or give away, / Let it presage the ruin of your love” (III.ii.172-73). Portia willingly gives up solitary control of the estate as long as Bassanio pledges his love. As Dusinger explains, Portia, like most Puritans, “did not repudiate the authority of the husband, but they qualified it” (82). Puritans, according to Dusinger, believed that men still maintained authority, but that wives gave their submission voluntarily out of and in exchange for love (83). Even though Portia abdicates her sole authority and possession of the household, she never gives up her personality or her right to advise, admonish, and even test her husband. Dusinger calls Portia’s submission “an act of courtesy,” but she remains completely independent (85). As I have suggested contrary to Azjenstat, Portia lives in a covenantal world negotiating between conditional and unconditional or contract and promise resulting in equality. Portia adds her own conditions to the marriage covenant to make sure that Bassanio will honor her by wearing her ring. The ring may seem incongruent in this examination of Puritan influences because as the 1572 “A View of Popish Abuses Yet Remaining in the Church” suggests, wedding rings symbolize popery or iconography because they symbolize a “sacramental sign” and “make an idol of his wife.” This view represents an extreme minority view even within Puritans. While Shakespeare was greatly influenced by the Puritans he also was influenced by the religious debate and here decides to use the rings as part of the marriage conditions in spite or maybe because of the associations with Catholicism. Portia gives the ring away, rejecting the role of idol and Catholicism, but also refusing to assign that role to Bassanio either. Shakespeare seems

to use rings for several reasons, for their association with Catholicism and their punworthy potential as a symbol of marital sexuality or violation of it. Shakespeare certainly seems to be glorifying covenantal marriage and not insinuating its fallen or idolatrous nature, a Catholic notion. Lisa Hopkins suggests that the rings have associations “with cuckoldry, wrongful possession and the betrayal of the very marriage bond which the rings themselves ostensibly symbolize and confirm. They thus represent security and danger, identity and difference” (48). The rings also foster a discussion on marriage chastity or the violation of it. The rings serve as a condition of the covenant to value marriage over friendship and reality over idolatry. Korda believes this makes the rings “a bond of credit, and her exercise of will and skill in guarding the creditability of that bond and protecting her portion against the risk of male (ad)venture. Portia’s solution to the strictures that circumscribe her agency, or will, is not to abrogate the law but to maneuver skillfully within it” (140). The rings represent the promise to fulfill the covenantal obligations. Simon Critchley and Tom McCarthy similarly believe that that the ring symbolizes the sale or interest of Portia’s love purchased by the contractual currency of desire or love (9-16). The rings themselves are not iconographic, but the rejection of iconography.

More than just love, Portia yearns for Bassanio to reciprocate the respect and honor she covenants him, for “Nothing is good, I see, without respect” (V.i.99). She sets the conditions of the ring as a way to assure that Bassanio honors her above any other relationship by promising that he will only take it off in death. Newman points out that while Portia casts herself as an object and passive, her “declaration of love veers away in its final lines from the exchange system the preceding lines affirm” (25). In giving the ring Portia gives more than Bassanio can return, and Newman proposes that she “short-circuits the system of exchange and the male bonds it creates, winning her husband from the arms of Antonio” (26). Newman suggests that Portia



uses contractual language to exact contractual and even promissory obligations from Bassanio. Ajzenstat suggests that Portia's threat of conditional fidelity is just a threat (270). Portia sets up her fidelity as conditional on Bassanio's behavior, but preserves the promissory because she would never transgress her fidelity even if Bassanio does. Portia never uses contractual language to forsake her own promissory ideas of marriage, but she uses them to renegotiate her place within the marriage. Bassanio initially follows Portia's advice rather well. When he hears the news of Antonio's predicament, Bassanio takes Portia's advice to marry her so he can take twenty times over the amount owed to free his friend because he will control her assets. He also listens to her about waiting to consummate the marriage. Bassanio makes it seem that he only goes to free Antonio because he has Portia's "good leave" (III.ii.324). This attitude does not last.

Later in the play, Bassanio shows his true ideas about marriage. While Bassanio loves his wife, he does not consider her his equal or weigh his promise as equal to her promise. When Bassanio offers his wife and life to save Antonio from death, it prompts Portia's response that "Your wife would give you little thanks for that / If she were by to hear you make that offer" (IV.i.288-89). Bassanio sees Antonio as his equal, as someone worthy of offering all his "possessions," including his wife. Some critics, like Hopkins, speculate that Antonio's name has homosexual connotation (49), but entertaining this idea does not change the meaning of his relationship with Portia significantly. Bassanio may at first see Portia as more of an economic investment than a love interest or partner, but he comes to see her as more of an equal. At first Bassanio prioritizes friendship or homosocial bonds over marriage although the marriage contract includes promises to take Portia as "his companion, or yoke-fellow" not inferior (*Christian Oeconomie* 125). Bassanio values the advice of Portia, the male, over the advice of Portia, his wife. Perkins, taking his ideas from the Bible, emphasizes how in marriage "a man

leauē father and mother, and shall cleauē vnto his wife, (as two boords are ioyned together with glue) and they which were two, shall be one flesh” (10). This implies placing his wife before his friendship.

Bassanio does not honor his marriage contract, so Portia sets out to help Bassanio honor his obligations. Portia, in a merciful manner, sets out to require contractual obligations while going beyond her own contractual obligations. Some like Jean Howard might contend that cross dressing gives Portia her power to confront Bassanio because “crossdressing, like other disruptions of the Renaissance semiotics of dress, opened a gap between the supposed reality of one's social station and sexual kind and the clothes that were to display that reality to the world...To transgress the codes governing dress was to disrupt an official view of the social order” (421). Cross dressing gives Portia a chance to see Bassanio's violation of contractual or promissory obligations, but not the power to force him to keep his obligations, just because she now appears as a man. The breach in honor triggers and authorizes Portia's test to see if Bassanio will give up the ring. Portia sets out to make sure that her spouse will fulfill or renew his conviction to keep his part of the covenant, a very Puritan test. Portia easily causes Bassanio to give up the ring that he says he values over his life because Portia appears as a man to whom he owes a debt of gratitude. Portia points out, when her husband returns home, that Bassanio was “in all sense... much bound to” his friend Antonio (V.i.135). She believes that Bassanio's bond or commitment to friends or males should not supercede his contractual obligation with his wife. Portia resents both Antonio and the doctor's relationship taking precedence over hers because they are male and, therefore to Bassanio, equal. When Bassanio admits to losing the ring, Portia admonishes him for so casually giving up “your wife's first gift, / A thing stuck on with oaths upon your finger, / And so riveted with faith unto your flesh” (V.i.167-69). Portia, as we see later

with Helena, wants her husband to fulfill his duties, which his relationship with Antonio and other men stop him from satisfying.

Portia bluntly requires Bassanio to fulfill all his marital obligations or she will withhold or violate an obligation of marriage. Her threats to withhold intimacy or to give herself to the doctor act as merciful devices to help Bassanio recommit his oath. Ajzenstat explains that even though the threat is deadly serious, “We need not think that she actually would retaliate in this way if the issue arose. She may well be incapable of it” (270). Portia will not abandon her covenantal duties even if Bassanio abandons some of his. Even if Bassanio had homosexual tendencies, he would still need to commit to Portia and see her as an equal. Portia, like Helena, holds Bassanio to the same conception of marital virtue he expects from her. Requiring the same physical, spiritual, and mental fidelity makes them equal in the partnership. Portia expects Bassanio to treat her as a spiritual and mental equal, instead of his property, and to honor her above his friends, as his “yoke-fellow.” Portia holds him to this standard by threatening that she not give the ring back or lie with Bassanio until he swears again that he will not break his oath and will keep it above his bond to his friends. Portia helps Bassanio recommit to his contractual obligations after being admonished for breaching the covenant.

Portia, in *Merchant of Venice*, seems to ask for equality or more respect in her marriage. She officially relinquishes her property to Bassanio, but not her ability to advise because she suggests how to arrange the marriage and dole out the money for Antonio’s situation. Portia still essentially controls the property. Some recent critics, such as Chaplin or Nancy Lindheim, point out that the re-appropriated texts and traditions “by Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, and other classical authors taught that a friendship between two men, if practiced properly, was the perfect human-relationship” (Chaplin 267), but Portia ignores this tradition. Portia demands that her and

Bassanio's relationship takes precedence over Bassanio's friendship or obligation to other men. Ajzenstat believes that this combination of conditional and unconditional behavior or contractual and promissory behavior results in a flawed world or ordinary marriage (270). I would argue on that the negotiation of this combination progresses toward a less flawed world or mutual marriage model. The homosocial tradition, which Portia must overcome, builds on the idea that men can be equals, resulting in more developed and complete relationships than marriage. Portia's bold actions make Bassanio acknowledge and give Portia the consideration she wants, creating a more equitable and complete relationship. Even dressing as a man has the effect of helping Bassanio and others believe Portia and Nerissa "are accomplished / With that...[they] lack" (III.iv.62)—equality. While I do not agree that Portia's power comes from cross dressing I do agree with Howard that "they do reveal that masculine prerogatives are based on custom, not nature, since a woman can indeed successfully assume masculine positions of authority" (433). Bassanio starts to see Portia in a new light of someone who can be his confidant, friend, and advisor. Portia, as Natasha Korda, explicates does not "attempt to circumvent divine Providence, but rather aligns it with an emergent ethos of virtuous, Christian exactitude" (143). For Korda, Portia sees her marriage as a mutual bond where both partners deserve "due benevolence" as Paul suggests (151). Bassanio starts to see Portia as more of an equal because she has overstepped her accepted role to accomplish due benevolence for herself. Bassanio simultaneously starts listening to and respecting Portia more while recognizing his own obligations and responsibilities in the marriage. Even though Portia oversteps her role, it does not mean she gives up her femininity or virtue, but actively lives it. This new concept of marriage as the ideal relation mostly originated from the Reformation, influenced greatly by Puritans.

Another poignant Shakespearean example of covenantal negotiation that pushes toward equality in marriage can be seen in Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*. Shakespeare probably wrote *Merchant of Venice* about 1596 or 1597 and *All's Well That Ends Well* about 1602 or 1603. While this does not seem like a great lapse of time, Shakespeare wrote about thirteen works in between—writing not only comedies, but some histories, and his early tragedies—letting him develop his characters. Shakespeare writes strong woman characters, but in his later plays they appear and remain openly strong and intrinsic to the plot. For example there may have been some strong characters like Mistress Page and Ford from *Merry Wives of Windsor*, Beatrice from *Much Ado about Nothing*, Viola from *Twelfth Night*, and Rosalind from *As You Like It*, but Shakespeare seems to subvert their strength and independence at each play's conclusion. The characters of Helena from *All's Well*, Isabella from *Measure for Measure*, Desdemona from *Othello*, and Cordelia from *King Lear* represent main characters who are not contented with the lot dealt them and change it. Helena and Isabella employ the bed trick to keep Bertram and Angelo chaste. Desdemona marries Othello against her father's wishes and bravely faces Othello. The latter plays mostly center on a male character, but like Cordelia in *King Lear* who sneaks back to find her father, the women characters refuse to passively let men order their lives. Puritans as well as Queen Elizabeth's reign influenced Shakespeare's stronger portrayal of women. Portia possesses higher position and power from the start, so she fights less to gain the respect and equality she thinks she deserves. Helena, unlike Portia, scrapes respect and equality from nothing and utter loathing. Because of this struggle, the respect she earns seems more sincere and complete. This shows the evolution of marriage covenantal thought in Shakespeare's mind, which was moving toward more equality as he presents stronger female characters like Helena, Isabella, Desdemona, and Cordelia.

In *All's Well That Ends Well*, as in *Merchant*, Shakespeare shows how Bertram as well as Helena see their marriage as a contract. The marriage is first set up as Helena's reward for healing the king. Bertram initially declares he "cannot love her" (II.iii.145), but agrees finally after the king's honor requires the "contract" (II.ii.178). Their marriage from the beginning is set up as a contract. Bertram takes advantage of the structure of their marriage as a contract and refuses to complete the marriage contract with Helena by bedding her, until she completes the conditions he sets up for her. Bertram writes Helena in a letter that she must "get the ring upon my finger, which never shall come off, and show me a child begotten of thy body that I am the father to, then call me husband" (III.ii.57-60) as new stipulations of the marriage covenant or contract.

In the play, Bertram believes that if he does not bed Helena or complete the contract, he can void his and Helena's marriage or contract. Bertram adds conditions to the contract that should make it impossible to complete the contract. While Bertram sets up his side of the marriage contract, he ignores his own obligations. Bertram enters the marriage covenant intending to violate his own responsibilities of marriage by not procreating, spiritually teaching, connecting with, helping, or staying faithful to Helena. Helena must fight more for equality and respect in her marriage. She has already proved her worthiness by her virtue, her education, and her service to the king, but Bertram refuses to recognize it. Bertram is avoiding both the duties of cohabitation and consummation, which Perkins sets out as one of marriage's aims. While Bertram believes that the marriage is a contract, he endeavors to amend the contract because he does not believe that he was an agent in the contract's formation. He intends to violate his part of the contract making the contract void.

Within the contract, the partners should be treated as equals with equal responsibility. Gordis observes that the covenant between God and man implies some kind of equality (386), so the marriage covenant should also imply some kind of equality. In application this moves toward true equality. Perkins's earlier example of Eve coming out of Adam's side shows her as his mate and not his head or servant. Eve does not completely escape the hierarchy of being taken out of Adam, but she is not his servant. William Gouge from this period also remarks that the inequality between men and women, if it existed, was a "small inequality [...] betwixt man and wife." (303) Gouge also suggests that "Though the man be as the head, yet is the woman as the hart, which is the most excellent part of the body next to the head, farre more excellent than any other member under the hart, and almost equall to the head in many respects and as necessary as the head" (303). In this way, Gouge emphasizes that the sexes seem equal or needful but with different purposes; thus, if there is inequality it is indistinguishable or written off as part of their different purposes. While men and women never completely escape the hierarchy, the hierarchy can appear almost imperceptible, which is not the case at the beginning of *All's Well That Ends Well*. Bertram seems to feel no sense of love or even obligation to Helena because she is a woman and of a lower class. Bertram may also only see Helena in terms of an Other or an object as McCandless, Bamber, and Ellen Belton point out. In his eyes, Helena cannot be his equal even with her education and virtuous qualities. Bertram does not regard Helena as an equal partner in the contract because only he is allowed to amend or set out the specifics of the contract. Bertram expects Helena to try to accomplish the specifics, fail, and free him of the contract. Bertram holds onto the notion historian James Johnson expresses, that the idea of marriage as a contract "implies that each relationship can be dissolved for non-performance of covenant duties: a king can be deposed, an errant marriage partner can be divorced" (116). If Helena fails to perform the

contractual duties Bertram sets up for her, Bertram believes that the contract will be dissolved or in a sense he can divorce Helena and pursue Diana.

Bertram treats his marriage like a contract. In a contract both parties must consent to make it legal. Perkins describes how important the “free and full consent of the parties” are to the “Sure-making of the parties contracted” (*Christian Oeconomie* 69). Without the free consent of both parties the contract could be invalid. With the seemingly paradoxical nature of his conditions Bertram has already released himself from the contract because he believes there is no way that Helena can accomplish those conditions. Bertram does not realize that he cannot unilaterally release himself from the contract, but must either have Helena’s consent or actual violation of the agreement after fulfilling his end. Bertram also cannot release himself because he believes the king coerced him because he gave his consent, even if he only did it to retain the King’s honor, it is binding. Bertram legally entered the marriage, but tries to illegally dissolve it. A.G Harmon describes how “Bertram’s conditions are added illegitimately. The contract did not anticipate them and deserves execution on its face. But as is often said in the play, Helena is owed more than she is paid, and gives more than she demands; it is characteristic of her to meet conditions she need not fulfill in order to prove her love” (132). Helena, like God, chooses to go out of her way to make Bertram fulfill his part of the bargain out of a sense of love and obligation. Helena understands that “Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie, / Which we ascribe to heaven” (I.ii.216-17). She will help Bertram see that she is his equal and can accomplish whatever he requires to prove that. Helena also wants to show Bertram that the contract cannot be unilateral.

Bertram, in forcing Helena to regard her marriage as a contract, pushes her to overstep the prescribed bounds of a wife at the time to bring the contract to fruition. Helena had a choice



to abandon her obligations and let the integrity of the marriage covenant lapse, but to complete the covenant she must fulfill her marital obligations and help Bertram fulfill his as well, requiring action and trickery. Perkins does expound that there might be “sufficient cause to dissolve a contract, yet it is meet that there be a convenient space of time agreed vpon, wherein all meanes may be vsed for the curing of this disease, to the end that Gods wil touching their amendment may be the more euidently knowne; and both the parties themselues, and their friends may giue testimonie to the world, that they haue had a carefull respect of the contract before made” (*Christian Oeconomie* 75). Helena takes advantage of this grace period or *convenient space of time* to foster Bertram’s compliance. Helena steps up as an equal party in the contract and takes equal responsibility to fulfill the marriage covenant instead of ending it. This shows a negotiation of the Puritan covenant problem as Helena acts in a promissory manner.

Helena accomplishes not only the terms that Bertram sets up, but helps him fulfill the full ends of marriage. Not only will Bertram procreate and stay faithful to her, but Helena accomplishes the enormous feat of making Bertram love, respect, help, and even support her. Helena remains chaste and pure in her actions, but goes out of her way to help Bertram fulfill that end as well. Shakespeare shows the Puritan idea that marriage no longer should be seen as a sinful lifestyle with a double standard of virtue for men and women. Unlike most early plays concerned with the woman staying faithful, this play shows the push for the man to stay faithful as well. When Helena goes out of her way to help Bertram fulfill the marriage contract by bedding her, she also prevents him from committing adultery with Diana. Helena does not allow Bertram to take away Diana’s virtue, while maintaining his own, but holds him to a similar standard of chastity. This might even lead to the assertion that because they are held to the same standard they are equal.

Helena's accomplishments in this regard are the beginnings of greater equality. Juliet Dusinberre discusses in her book *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* how the doctrine of chastity in marriage gave chastity "spiritual prestige," which led to the "Puritan assertion of spiritual equality between men and women" (3). This spiritual equality comes out of requiring the same standard of virtue from both sexes where before only the women were required to be chaste to preserve the sanctity of the blood line or the husband's property. This may not have been the intention in establishing the Puritan doctrine of chaste marriage based on a covenantal model, but it was often the result. Dusinberre declares that the "drama from 1590 to 1625 is feminist in sympathy" (5), because it revolves around this idea of similar standards and equality.

In the end, Bertram respects Helena and Helena retains more power in her marriage because of the acts she has undertaken to help fulfill the contract. In fact, Helena's going beyond her normal gender role to help her husband fulfill the contract acts as a form of grace or promise because she goes beyond her contractual obligations to fulfill the covenant. Bertram lusts after Diana and intends not to cohabit with Helena, thus violating his end of the contract, which technically releases Helena from her marital obligations if the covenant is only a contract. Helena is unwilling to dissolve the covenant yet, so instead she goes beyond the required contractual standards to help Bertram fulfill his role of obligation. Bertram seems to see that he owes Helena his respect and love because of her actions.

Helena accomplishes this feat by first traveling as a pilgrim to Florence where Bertram is pursuing Diana. Traveling unaccompanied and meddling in her husband's affairs would not normally be something a woman is encouraged to do, but as the Countess and Helena recognize: "He [Bertram] cannot thrive, / Unless her prayers, whom heaven delights to hear / And loves to grant, relieve him from the wrath / Of greatest justice" (III.iv.26-29). Helena wants to pacify

heaven's wrath or justice for Bertram with mercy and action. Unlike the countess, Helena will not just pray, but go help Bertram complete his side of the covenant whether it is advisable or normal for her to do so. McCandless explains how in the Renaissance active was masculine and passive feminine (39), which means that "Helena challenges a restrictive standard of feminine chastity but, while doing so, she must answer to the chaste self-image shaped by patriarchal society" (43). This idea was accepted but often complicated by reality. Kathryn Schwarz proposes an interesting idea that Helena makes active the usually passive virtue of femininity—constancy (207). This suggests that Helena's actions do not violate her role or virtue, but reinterprets her role. She may not be abandoning her feminine role, but re-evaluating it as an active imperative as Kathryn Schwartz and also Eileen Cohen suggest. Helena enlists Diana to help her take Bertram's ring and lie with him. Helena justifies this act by stating that it "Is wicked meaning in a lawful deed / And lawful meaning in a wicked act, / Where both not sin, and yet a sinful fact" (III.vii.45-47). Helena is suggesting that her purpose is "lawful" (III.vii. 30). Thus, while Bertram may have "wicked meaning" or intention, he commits "a lawful deed" and in her "wicked act" of deception there is a lawful meaning and no real sin committed. To Helena what matters is not whether Bertram violates the covenant or contract, but whether he will eventually fulfill and honor the covenant. She says, "All's well that ends well" (IV.iv.35). While this may seem problematic for many because Helena takes an active role using deception and trickery, Michele Osherow advocates an interesting idea that the bed trick receives divine sanction because it mirrors those found in the Bible, like Tamar's bed trick (156). Cohen also legitimizes the bed trick describing how Bertram's lust may make women objects or all the same, but Helena becomes her true self with the bed trick, which demands acknowledgement (175-76). Bertram will be held to the same standard of virtue and chastity, and he will accomplish the

marriage “ends.” Perhaps these women step over their prescribed gender roles delving in their husband’s arena, but they do it to preserve the system of marriage, without violating virtue, but re-evaluating the definition of virtue and contract. Some like Cohen or Ellen Belton believe that characters like Helena “reverse traditional female behavior, invert stereotypes, and turn apparent lechery into the service of marriage. The ultimate irony, or secret hidden behind illusion, is that resourceful, autonomous women shore up marriage” (174). In fact while this behavior may seem subversive, women like Helena and Portia are not trying to act subversively. Instead these women are only trying to help their husbands keep their covenant of marriage. McCandless, who also sees Helena taking up the masculine position of actively desiring (38-39) as a negative position, also sees her doing this to be reborn “into culture as wife and mother” (49). This action can be seen as negative for those along the feminist line, like Schwartz, who see “any victory of normative relations is always, at least potentially, pyrrhic” (Schwartz 227). Puritan doctrine motivated change or re-evaluation of the existing system, which did push toward mutuality and equality.

Bertram also makes some progress toward fulfilling the covenant himself. After Bertram thinks Helena has died his attitude toward her changes. When he comes back to reconcile with the King, Bertram declares that while Helena was once hideous to him, he now loves and respects her. Bertram now sees the value of and recognizes Helena’s virtue. He willingly admits that he has not honored Helena as he should and will endeavor to do so. Helena’s reappearance and actions finish Bertram’s conversion. Perkins, as already discussed, suggests that honoring his wife consists “First, in making account of her, as his companion, or yoke-fellow” for she has come out of his side as his equal (*Christian Oeconomie* 125). Here Perkins advocates a common Puritan idea that the woman is not a servant or inferior to the man. Being the Head of the family

takes on a new, less authoritarian meaning in Perkins's words. Perkins secondly advocates being "wise & patient bearing or couering of her infirmities, as anger, waywardnes and such like, in respect of the weaknes of her sexe" (125). Perkins interprets that God's doctrine does not advocate leading by fear or force. Last, Perkins advocates a husband to "suffer himselfe sometimes to be admonished or aduised by her" (125). This may be the most radical change in Puritan covenant doctrine as it pertains to marriage—that a woman should be able to admonish and advise her husband even over his and other men's ideas. Shakespeare seems to be exploring this idea. When Helena reappears, Bertram exclaims that he will "love her dearly, ever, ever dearly" (V.iii.316). Bertram seems to recognize the fact that Helena was his equal in virtue, at least virtue in spirit and intellect, and above him in virtue of chastity, a Puritan ideal. Helena has shown her intellect by tricking Bertram into fulfilling terms he set himself, but thought impossible to accomplish. The bed trick that let Helena be herself now calls for a response. Bertram now sees Helena as more than the lower class wife he has been saddled with, but as an intellectual equal able to accomplish more than he thought possible, with character.

While Bertram may be putting on a show for the king, only resolving to fulfill his end of the covenant because he has no choice, he may really have realized Helena's potential and embraced fulfilling his end of the contract. He cannot only see her as property to discard, but a person of equal ability. Bertram now declares he will appreciate and love his wife. Helena's equality seems more complete because she had to go through more to earn it from Bertram. Here we see that Helena like Portia can stay chaste while making their spouses hold the same standard. These Shakespeare examples show the progression of his thought toward equality because of the application and exploration of covenantal ideas.

This covenant between God and man serves as the pattern for husband and wife; application pushes equality further. While Bertram's expressions of love and admiration for Helena might be interpreted as giving into the inevitability of his contract because Helena lives and has completed the added conditions of the contract, the covenant calls for more. Harmon explores how contracts and laws in *All's Well That Ends Well* do not stay stagnant. Harmon believes that "A careful lawful balance of those things [conditional versus unconditional] can effect a significant transformation, one with incumbent rights and duties born from entitlement. The discovery of that balance provides unity between both the characters in the play, and between the players and their audience" (139). Negotiating the covenant can effect change that creates unity and equality. This view of the covenant contrasts to the lingering Catholic view that emphasized God's grace as opposed to human's action. Catholic marriage retained the strict hierarchy between God and man and man and woman. Marriage for Catholics or less radical Protestants still remained that fallen institution to avoid fornication sanctified only by sacramental status (Lawler 82). This example, from Shakespeare's and other Renaissance works, shows how the covenant as contract pushed for more companionate or egalitarian relationships. Their marriage covenant also delves into territory as a marriage promise where the terms are not as well spelled out. As both Helena and Bertram resolve to fulfill the covenant, Helena has gone beyond her obligations and gender roles to accomplish it, making her more capable in Bertram's eyes. Both these literary examples push the characters' marriages toward equality. While this exploration of the covenant that pushes toward equality may have been more idealism and fiction than reality, the ideas advance and reflect more solidly in John Milton's culminating work *Paradise Lost* as well as later works.

## Conclusion

The writers of the Renaissance or early modern period, especially writers like Shakespeare and Milton, were familiar with and played off of the themes of the marriage covenant in their works. Shakespeare may not have openly supported Puritan ideas, but he was influenced by them and explored them. Later we see authors like Milton definitely supporting these ideas and taking them further. In *Paradise Lost* Milton builds upon the Biblical account of Eve as a “help meet.” To Adam, Eve is “Thy likeness, thy fit help, thy other self” (VI.1086-87). Here, by utilizing words like *fit* and *other*, Milton seems to be implying equality. God gives Eve to Adam because he feels alone and wants to be able to converse rationally. While Adam is surrounded by animals he expresses the sentiment that he is alone because he has no equal. Adam expresses rationally that “Among unequals what society/ Can sort, what harmony or true delights? / Which must be mutual, in proportion due / Given and received; but, in disparity, The one intense, the other one remiss, / Cannot well suit with either, but soon prove/ Tedious alike. / Of fellowship I speak / such as I seek, fit to participate/ All rational delight” (VIII.383-391). Adam looks not just for harmony, but also for the delight and society that come from mutual or equal association, which the animals cannot provide. God gave Adam Eve in response to this plea for mutual or equal association; therefore, she is meant to be his equal. Milton and many writers of his period openly associated with the Puritan movement and their work reflects those ideas. The tensions within authors’ conceptions of the covenant led to the interpretation of the covenant as a convergence of works and grace or contract and promise. This negotiation interestingly pushed toward the creation of equality in marriage, especially for women. On the contractual side, men were required to provide as well as take, and women, if they did subject themselves, did it voluntarily. The negotiation between grace and works led couples to newly

examine their own sense of responsibility and examine their expectations for their spouses.

While women did not set out to displace the system known as patriarchy, fulfilling the covenant often resulted in displacement. Milton especially shows the movement from hierarchical mutuality to, if not equality, more equality than generally thought of for the time. The works of Shakespeare and Milton show a negotiation or struggle to define the marital relationship that reflected the bigger social negotiation of dealing with God, which ultimately pushed toward dealing with issues of responsibility and equality. Their works not only show the struggle that was going on within society, but helped influence that examination of equality and responsibility in the marriage relationship as well as other relationships with God, king, family, and fellowman.



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