

# Are modern brides ready to get hitched and be buxom?

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I was conjugating an Italian verb when something triggered my lexicological curiosity. Conjugate, I thought, looks very similar to conjugal – but the first has to do with grammar, the second with marriage. My dictionary told me that conjugate is a term used also in other fields. In biology, for example, one speaks of bacteria conjugating, meaning that they become temporarily united. Both conjugate and conjugal can be traced to the Latin “jugum”, meaning yoke (related is the Latin “jungere”, to join, root of the words junction, juncture). The mental picture of husband and wife yoked together is conjured up also by the expression to get hitched – a colloquialism from 1844 meaning to get married.

Centuries before it became one of the sacraments of the Catholic Church, marriage was an established practice with rituals that varied depending on the period, the society and the status of the families involved. In Ancient Rome there were various kinds of marriage, with different contracts, but all were intended for life and for the purpose of begetting children. Our words marriage and marry come from the Latin for husband, “maritus”. Matrimony, on the other hand, has its root in “matrem”, the nominative case of the Latin “mater”, meaning mother, and the suffix “-monium”, signifying condition, state. The English adjectives nuptial and connubial derive from the Latin “nubes” (cloud), on which the Latin verb “nubere” (to put on a veil, get married) is based – the linking concept is cloud as a kind of veil.

Since about 1200, English has used the verb to wed (“wedding”) rather than marry to signify the union of husband and wife. Wed has a Germanic root meaning to pledge. The Old English “weddung”, meaning the state of being wed, and source of the

word wedding, is documented from about 1300, although in medieval England the ceremony was usually called “brydlop”, literally the bride run, which referred to the custom of conducting the bride to her new home (a related word is elope, meaning to run off, and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century specifically to run off to be married in secret).

Before marrying, a couple usually gets engaged. Originally engage meant to give as a pledge, and later to enter into a contract. Since the early 1700s it has referred to the preliminaries of marriage. Wedding vows have changed greatly, but traditionally the bride and groom would plight their troth at the altar. Plight, from the Old English “pliht” (related to the German “Pflicht”, duty), means to promise solemnly; troth is a variant of truth, first recorded in 1663. In fact, another word for engagement is betrothal.

It’s fascinating how some words move through language with the dance of time. Take buxom. Its root is the Middle English “buhsum”, meaning capable of being bent (related is the German “biegsam”, pliable), and by extension obliging or obedient. In the 1400s, a bride promised to be buxom – obedient – to her husband. Eventually buxom signified vigorous, good-tempered, and by the 20<sup>th</sup> century it described an ample-bosomed woman.

I wonder, would a modern bride with a lexicological bent dare to weave buxom into her wedding vows?