Wedding Traditions in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance


The bride being attired in a gown of sheeps russet [coarse reddish-brown cloth], and a kirtle [coat] of fine worsted [wool], her head attired with a billiment of gold, and her hair as yellow as gold hanging down behind her, which was curiously combed and pleated, according to the manner in those days: she was led to church between two sweet boys, with bride-laces and rosemary tied about their silken sleeves.... There was there a fair bride-cup of silver and gilt carried before her, wherein was a goodly branch of rosemary, gilded very fair, hung about with silken ribands of all colours: next was there a noise of musicians, that played all the way before her: after her came all the chiefest maidens of the country, some bearing great bride-cakes, and some garlands of wheat, finely gilded, and so she passed to the Church.

Shakespeare drew from both Middle Ages and Renaissance wedding customs when he wrote Romeo and Juliet. Here are some common wedding traditions from both time periods:

- Diamond rings became popular between 1200 and 1400. Italians believed that diamonds were created from the flames of love.
- Brides began to carry bouquets and toss them to the guests in the 1300s. Prior to that, it was popular for the bride to toss her garter to the men, reenacting how a lady would toss her ribbon or colors to her knight. However, sometimes drunken guests got out of control and tried to remove the garter ahead of time. To avoid this situation, brides switched to tossing flowers.
- English newlyweds between 1300 and 1650 would pile small cakes as high as they could. Then the couple would lean over and try to kiss without knocking down the pile of sweets. If the couple succeeded, they would share a lifetime of prosperity.
- Between 1300 and 1650, weddings of powerful noble families could last up to a week. During that time, the guests would eat, sleep, and be entertained at the expense of the bridal families.
- In the 1300s, brides favored blue, red, peach, orange, tan, and white for festive colors. They often chose blue or yellow for their garters or for flowers tucked in their hair. Thus the tradition of "something blue" began.
- Weddings in the 1400s often featured a living centerpiece, made of pastry and filled with 24 live blackbirds. As part of the wedding celebration, the birds would be released. The nursery rhyme of "four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie" originated from this custom.

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