

“A Triumph of Hope over Experience”: Chance and Choice in the History of Marriage

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When Dr Johnson made his famous eighteenth-century remark about second marriages being a triumph of hope over experience, his wit could easily have been directed toward the unions that Steven King has illuminated. It is never entirely clear why people marry or choose to marry the people they do, a situation that is as frustrating to historians as to friends and family. Marriage remains one of life's great mysteries, perhaps the last great mystery left to us. It fascinates and absorbs us, providing an inexhaustible audience for daytime soap operas and evening situation comedies. Romance novels top the fiction charts; and Hollywood returns to the theme time and again.

Marriage fascinates precisely because it is so unpredictable, so much beyond our control. One would think that the riskiness of the lottery of love would frighten, even repel, us, but instead we are drawn to it as a gambler is drawn to the slots or the track. Love is, like gambling, a form of “deep play”, which reveals things about ourselves that we can only discover when we move from the world of choice to the realm of chance.¹ Today, marriage is often the central episode in the stories we tell when we try to explain ourselves to ourselves and to others. It is the most elaborately celebrated and ritualized of all the events of the adult life course, the source of our most precious images and memories. Marriage is simply enchanting.²

Were marriage subject to calculated control it would soon lose its place in the popular imagination in the same way as have all those areas of life, like work, which have undergone the disenchantment that Max Weber ascribed to the modern process of rationalization. Work no longer stirs our imagination, but it is well to remember that not long ago it too was the stuff of myth, invested with elaborate rituals, the source of powerful images. More recently, birth and death have also been stripped of mystery by high-tech medicalization, becoming more procedural and less ritualized, and losing their ability to fascinate in the ways they once did.³ In this disenchanted world, marriage remains exempt from the same process.

1. The concept of “deep play” originated with the anthropologist Clifford Geertz; for an imaginative application to history, see Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740–1790* (Williamsburg, 1982).

2. John R. Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making: Myth, Ritual, and the Quest for Family Values* (New York, 1996), ch. vii; Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love* (Cambridge, 1995), ch. vi.

3. Robbie E. Davis-Floyd, *Birth as an American Rite of Passage* (Berkeley, 1992); Michael Kearl, *Endings: A Sociology of Death* (New York, 1989).

The rationalization of modern life has much to recommend it; and I doubt whether many of us would wish to exchange the securities and certainties we enjoy today for the opportunity to experience the terrors of premodern birth or death. But even as it calms our fears, rationalization empties life of meaning, or, rather, displaces it to realms where things are not managed for us, where we can explore a wider range of possibilities and thereby know ourselves and others in greater depth. And so it is that marriage has attracted to itself much of the creative imagination that was once more broadly distributed across the other realms of life, including work. Today, the existential cultural functions of marriage have grown to the point that they overshadow its economic and social functions. Any history of marriage that ignores these social and cultural dimensions of marriage is likely to be a rather meaningless, empty enterprise.

I

As Steven King points out, most histories of marriage have concentrated on the economic dimension of the subject, treating it as if it is a matter of rational choice. It has been a standard assumption of most of those who have worked on the history of marriage in north-western Europe and North America that marriage is to be understood in the context of household formation; and that fluctuations in access to the resources necessary to establish a household have accounted for variations in both the volume of marriage and the age of marriage over time.

To be sure, we have been aware that the resources necessary to the establishment of a small business or farm have never been available to everyone, and that rational choice, to the degree that it has existed, has always been more the prerogative of males than females. But, despite evidence to the contrary, historical demographers and social historians have clung to the notion that the timing and choice of marriage partner is essentially a matter of individual choice. Historians might disagree about when marital individualism set in – Alan Macfarlane locating it in the late Middle Ages, Lawrence Stone and Edward Shorter placing it at a much later point in time – but they are united in seeing history as moving in the direction of choice.⁴

King's account is a useful corrective to this story. Although his evidence can be criticized as unsystematically collected and therefore untypical, it does suggest that for most people of working-class or lower middle-class backgrounds the decision of marry and the choice of mate were far less calculated than we have been led to believe. Using accounts of plebeian

4. Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism: The Family, Property, and Social Transition* (Oxford, 1978); Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500–1800* (New York, 1977); Edward Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family* (New York, 1975).

courtship and marriage, King demonstrates that the process was neither very rational nor a matter of individual choice. It is clear from his cases that many who married were doing so for other than economic reasons; and that most choices were collectively rather than individually determined. He shows that women were as active as men in the process, and that many different people – immediate family, friends, neighbors, distant kin, clergy, and poor law officers – had a hand in the making and timing of the marriage. One might even say on the basis of King’s evidence that among this strata of society it took a community to make a marriage.

These observations are not exactly original. Many others, including Keith Wrightson and myself, have long argued against seeing British marriages from a purely individualistic perspective.⁵ And there is a considerable body of literature for North America which also challenges the rational choice perspective.⁶ King’s research of the role of kin and other actors in the courtship and marriage process is, however, a welcome amplification; and it is hoped that in a fuller study he will make an even stronger case for this interpretation.

It is clear that throughout the late medieval and early modern periods most English marriages were neither arranged nor individually chosen, but fell somewhere in between, the product of a combination of circumstances that mystified the participants as much as they have mystified the historians who have tried to explain them. The real story of marriage cannot be read backwards from conventional sources. King is right in pointing out that the legal act that is the principle “fact” on which historical demographers and social historians rely is only one of several outcomes of the marriage process. He should have noted that church marriage by banns or licence was not the only definition of nuptials in England before the Hardwicke Act of 1753; and even after that time there were several different meanings of “marriage” circulating among the lower classes, thus complicating the historian’s task of determining the age and volume of nuptiality.⁷

Using diary entries to show how failures hugely outnumbered successes in the marriage game, King reminds us of just how precarious and highly contingent upon circumstances “getting married” actually was. He does well to avoid using autobiographical narratives that are constructed retrospectively and therefore recounts the process as much more intentional and rational than it actually was. The fact that most of our historical accounts

5. Keith Wrightson, *English Society, 1580–1680* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1982), ch. iii; John R. Gillis, *For Better, For Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (New York, 1985), part I.

6. Ellen Rothman, *Hearts and Hands: A History of Courtship in America* (Cambridge, MA, 1987); Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart: Men, Women, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1989).

7. John R. Gillis, “Conjugal Settlements: Resort to Clandestine and Common Law Marriage in England and Wales, 1650–1850”, in John Bossy (ed.), *Disputes and Settlements: Law and Human Relations in the West* (Cambridge, 1983).

of marriage have been constructed from autobiographies and other sources written after the event has contributed to the dominant rational choice model. But even diaries can be selective and probably underestimate the chaos of ordinary lives. Nevertheless, by using them, we arrive at a very different picture, one that is much closer to actual experience of the chaos of love.

II

King argues that we need to examine the particulars of courtship, what he calls their “narratives”. But what exactly does he mean by this term? He seems to mean the chronicle of events that lead to or away from marriage. But what about the narratives that the participants told themselves as they were living the experience? How did this strata of early modern English women and men understand the process they were engaged in? Here King’s account is largely mute. While he talks of the need to embed the marriage process in its cultural as well as social and economic context, his account does not move beyond descriptions of behavior to an examination of culture.

This is a shame, for, had he examined this dimension, he might be able to explain why, despite all the frustrations and lack of control over the process, women and men were determined to remain in the marriage game. King cites Dudley Ryder, wondering at his cousin Watkins’ persistence in the face of so much bad luck in love, “at the assurance he has to make so many attempts after having failed [. . .]”, and we must wonder too, for it is not entirely clear why marriage rates remained as high as they did among plebeian populations whose marriage chances were so evidently risky. If the answers do not lie in most cases in the realm of economic possibilities, just what encouraged women and men to enter love’s lottery?

The answer lies, I think, in both culture and social structure. What needs to be underlined is that in early modern England marriage was as much a matter of status as economics. As I have argued elsewhere, marriage, and especially the wedding rite itself, was constitutive of several things – maturity, gender and belonging to a community – that today are often established by other means.⁸ In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, plebeian marriage was a public act and a highly ritualized event. Even among the lower classes, where the big peasant wedding symbolic of the establishment of a household had fallen away, there persisted a set of very public rites that confirmed the status of the newlyweds in the community. Indeed, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a whole set of new courtship and wedding rites arose for just this purpose, eventually dying out as society became more urbanized and relationships more anonymous.

8. Gillis, *For Better, For Worse*, part II.

Plebeian marriage rites not only constituted communal recognition, but ritually confirmed the movement from youth to adulthood, endowing the male with the fullness of manhood and the female with an equal measure of adult femininity. Marriage may not have created a household, but it was no less necessary to establishing a place in the world.

A wedding was not, as it became among the Victorian middle classes, a private, family matter. In this earlier period, and especially among the class of people King is exploring, it took on even greater public weight as a regulator of social relations, as a dramatic ritual through which the newlyweds defined their relationship to their peers, kin and family at large. The plebeian wedding was a concern, not just of the couple but also the entire community. If it took a community to make a marriage, it took a marriage to affirm community. The personal and social functions of marriage were inseparable at the time.

The very publicity of plebeian courtship and marriage was the source of its meaning and the essence of its utility to a population denied other sources of social recognition and respect. Even in the face of official condemnation and social disdain, ordinary folk fought for their customs just as they fought for their jobs and justice. And they relied on their friends, kin and neighbors to provide them with an appreciative audience for this social drama, a fact that had a determinative effect on how and when they wed.

III

Even so, a social explanation will not explain the risks people were willing to take. The appeal of plebeian courtship and marriage will not be found in the realm of reason, but rather in what my colleague Jackson Lears calls the “culture of chance”.⁹ The rites that ordinary people found so attractive belonged to a category of “deep play”, a game in which women and men quite consciously surrendered to the goddess Fortuna, reserving for themselves some capacity to influence her through various forms of magic, but, by and large, placing themselves in the hands of supernatural forces, regarded as external to themselves. Evidence of this lies in their frequent resort to fortune-tellers and diviners, in the prayers they said and the dream books they consulted. As King’s evidence shows, early modern people were also more willing to turn over decisions to matchmakers and go-betweens, thus relieving themselves of personal responsibility.¹⁰ Clearly, they saw marriage as something that happened to them, something that they might be

9. Jackson Lears, *The Gambler’s Search: Grace, Luck, and Fortune in American Cultural History* (forthcoming).

10. John R. Gillis, “From Ritual to Romance: Toward an Alternative History of Love”, in Carol Z. Stearns and Peter N. Stearns (eds), *Emotion and Social Change: Toward a New Psychohistory* (New York, 1988), pp. 87–121.

able to influence to some degree, but not something subject to the reign of reason.

The culture of chance remained dominant until the nineteenth century and is still evident today, though in more restricted ways. Although most of history is written as if people control their own destinies, for most people fate and luck have offered more acceptable explanations than does choice. One might even go as far as to say that for most of human history, humanity has been more comfortable with chance than with choice. In fact, most people have preferred to be ruled by Fortuna, for seeing life as a lottery provided that glimmer of hope otherwise denied by experience.

The notion of Fortuna was a form of rationalization, accounting for the successes, exonerating the failures. In the narratives of fate and luck, people told themselves, they were able to avoid blaming themselves or others. The culture of chance also explained away the inequalities and injustices of the marriage market itself. Generational, class and gender tensions, always just below the surface, were thus prevented from breaking into open conflict. Fortuna was the guarantee of individual peace of mind, but also social peace more generally.

IV

Today, courtship and marriage are understood in quite different terms, far more personal and individualized. Courtship is defined as the process of finding one's "real self" through mutual exploration of feelings and personalities with that one special other person.¹¹ What was once a very public set of events, carefully monitored by the community, has become the most private of all relationships. And marriage itself, while requiring a certain kind of dramatic performance in the form of the big white wedding, is invariably followed by the honeymoon, a reaffirmation of the private character of conjugality. Today's marriage rituals are less about creating social relations than about constructing personal identities. Marriage is still one of the crucial means of fashioning adult masculinity and femininity, in establishing a sense of adulthood. Today, marriage rites once reserved for heterosexuals are appropriated by gay and lesbian couples who find them equally useful in their construction of selfhood.

The meanings and rituals of marriage have changed, but risk has not been exorcised. The understanding of marriage as choice has never been universal. It was largely a male middle-class fable, a tale women never internalized and which most working-class people have also found unacceptable. That historians and social scientists have been so enamoured of rational choice explanations is clearly a reflection of their class and gender position.

11. Lystra, *Searching the Heart*, passim; Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making*, ch. vii; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love*, chs i, ii, vi.

However, now that these professions have become more diverse, other stories are coming to light, changing the understanding of love and marriage.

In this era of global economic restructuring, Western societies, and men in particular, have lost control of much that once seemed within their grasp. The marriage game has become a good deal riskier, as evidenced by the growing numbers of people who have been postponing nuptials or avoiding them entirely.¹² Chance seems to be gaining on choice, a fact that is reflected in the recent revival of matchmaking and marriage brokering. Today’s computerized dating services offer a new version of the old method of divination.

Chance still dominates the love stories we tell ourselves. However, the modern fable is not quite the same as that which was told by earlier generations. The fates have descended from on high to take up residence among us. We have naturalized Fortuna, internalizing that which was once perceived as external to ourselves. Romantic love, thought of as a powerful, if invisible, force coming from deep within the individual, has displaced the supernatural as an explanation for all that seems beyond rational control. Love is our explanation for everything that we cannot explain in any other terms.

But just as earlier generations had their ways of divining their fates, we have our techniques for “working on” our inner feelings. In recent years, many Americans and Europeans have turned to the services of marriage brokers and dating services as a way of dealing with uncertainty.¹³ This is not so much a denial of risk, but a way of calculating it, a recognition of just how risky the marriage game has become in the late twentieth century. It would seem that the culture of choice, so dominant among the middle classes, especially among middle-class men, from the mid-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, is fading. The culture of chance, always an underground current of modernity, seems to be gaining force. Take, for example, the amount of unprotected sex that still goes on in this age of AIDs and other infectious diseases. Those who are willing to risk their lives in this way are not necessarily heedless, but rather take the quite respectable position that sex should be an act of romantic love. Since love is viewed as a natural force, anything that interferes with it, including the rational choice of using a condom, is seen as unnatural, a denial of love itself. Here, hope trumps experience, sometimes with catastrophic effects.

Love and marriage are acts of faith. There are those who see them as our secular religion, citing high remarriage rates and the tendency of people

12. Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making*, ch. xi; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love*, chs i and ii.

13. Kay Deaux and Randel Hanna, “Courtship in the Personals Column: The Influence of Gender and Sexual Orientation”, *Sex Roles*, xi (1984), pp. 363–375; Stanley Wolf and Peter Young, “Looking for Mr. or Ms. Right: Self-Presentation in Videodating”, *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 51 (1989), pp. 483–488.

to place greater stock in fragile conjugality than other, more stable, adult relationships.¹⁴ All this suggests that Fortuna remains our reigning goddess, though she speaks a different language and her devotees use new means to divine her will. Perhaps it is time for historians, sociologists and psychologists to acknowledge this and put aside their god of rational choice so as to better understand the various cultures of love and marriage they encounter in their research. Steven King has performed a useful service in opening up the question of chance to historical examination, but there is a great deal of work to be done before Fortuna is restored to her rightful place in history.

14. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, *The Normal Chaos of Love*, ch. vi; Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making*, ch. vii.