INTRODUCTION

Historicising the English Marriage Plot

Marriage, Religion and the State

Four city blocks south of where I write these sentences in Baltimore, a banner hangs on the façade of a famous Unitarian church. Taking a stand in the debate over same-sex marriage, it reads: 'Civil marriage is a civil right.' This redolent phrase is embedded in history. Two centuries ago, Mary Ann Thompson and William Coates, young English Unitarians about to marry, wrote a letter that made approximately the same point:

> The undersigned, being Unitarian Dissenters, present to you [the minister officiating their wedding] the following Protest against the Marriage Ceremony . . . They lament that they are placed in a situation so unnatural, as that even forbearance to what they consider as established error would be a formal recantation of opinions which they have received, or convictions, and which they will renounce only on similar grounds. Against the Marriage Ceremony, then, they can but most solemnly protest, – Because it makes the marriage Ceremony a religious, rather than a civil, act; because as Christians and as Protestant Dissenters, it is impossible we can allow of the interference of any human institution with matters which concern our faith and consciences; – Because, as knowing nothing of a Priesthood in Christianity, the submission to a ceremony performed by a person in Holy Orders, or pretended Holy Orders is painful and humiliating to our feelings; – Because, as servants of Jesus, we worship the ONE LIVING AND TRUE GOD his God and our God, his Father and our Father, and disbelieve and abominate the Doctrine of the Trinity, in whose name the Marriage Ceremony is being performed. ((Signed) Wm. Coates, Mary Ann Thompson,)
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> Members of the Church of God known as the Free-Thinking Christians. (London, 10 June 1814)[1]

This too is a protest against treating marriage as other than a civil union, and although it belongs to a different political order than the contemporary movement to legalise same-sex marriage, it is no less entwined with Christianity. Unitarians like Coates and Thompson did not accept the

notion of the Trinity. In a rationalisation of Christian doctrine, they believed that only God the Father was divine. Such a belief had had serious implications: to declare it had been illegal in Britain until the year before their letter was written, when penal sanctions against anti-Trinitarianism, set in place by the 1698 Blasphemy Act, were at last lifted. Even so, Unitarians, like other English subjects, could only marry under the auspices of the Anglican Church. Almost all English marriages were solemnised in a church wedding presided over by an Anglican clergyman in an explicitly Trinitarian ceremony that called upon God to 'look mercifully' upon the marrying couple 'through Jesus Christ our Saviour, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit'.[2]

As far as Thompson and Coates are concerned, this ceremony was an abomination. It corrupted a privileged moment in their lives: the culmination of their personal marriage plot. That is why they addressed their letter of protest not to a civic authority but to an Anglican clergyman responsible for implementing the marriage law. And their letter was published in the newspapers, a sign that their questioning of the legitimacy of the church's role in weddings struck a chord. Such questioning animated religious nonconformists and secular-rationalists alike, and not just in Britain.

To take just one example, Immanuel Kant's famous essay, 'What Is Enlightenment?' (1784), had its origins in a newspaper dispute about marriage orchestrated by Johann Erich Biester, editor of the progressive *Berlinische Monatsschrift*. In 1783 Biester published his own rationalist 'Proposal, Not to Engage the Clergy Any Longer When Marriages Are Conducted', along with a rebuttal by clergyman Johann Friedrich Zöllner.[3] In that rebuttal, which defended sacramental marriage, Zöllner asked his adversaries: what is enlightenment? Kant's reply, a call to autonomous self-knowledge expressed as a critique of religion and paternalism, does not mention marriage. Yet its genesis in Biester and Zöllner's exchange reminds us that marriage was a touchstone of public discussion, helping to define a spectrum of opinion – conservative, oppositional, confessional, reformist, radical – across Europe.

Secular marriage reform of the kind that Biester envisaged was eventually to come to England, if under a different political franchise than that which regulated Coates and Thompson's involuntary Anglican wedding in 1814. Civil weddings were legally mandated in 1836, four years after the 1832 Reform Act which extended the franchise into the middle class and thus into English Dissent's heartlands. Thompson and Coates's letter makes clear, however, that in 1814 English marriage regulations enforced an alliance between the Established Church and the state's legal institutions,

and thereby relayed a particular relation between government and faith into the lives of almost every citizen. In this sense, and against much received wisdom, English marriage in the Georgian period did not simply belong to civil society.[4] And it is no coincidence that the period in which such regulations were in place saw marriage become a subject of intense debate. It also saw the development of a new popular literary genre centred on courtship and marriage in the context of everyday life. That genre was the novel's marriage plot.

The English Marriage Plot

It is hard to dispute that the history of the early English novel turns on its use of the marriage plot, which is understood to occasion many of the genre's innovations, especially the development of literary realism in the hands of authors such as Samuel Richardson and Jane Austen.[5] Yet, despite the wealth of scholarly work on the novel's domestic themes, there exists no thorough investigation of the modern English marriage plot's political origins.[6] This book aims to make good that gap, not through a comprehensive account of the many fictions using the device, but by examining the political conditions under which the genre emerged and, more particularly, by placing it in a context that standard accounts of 'the rise of the novel' (as well as more narrowly defined genres like 'the courtship novel' and 'domestic fiction') have tended to overlook.

I argue that English fiction turned to marriage between about 1740 and 1770 not so much out of an interest in the power dynamics of family life, or in the rise of individualism, or in the ethics of courtship, or even because of marriage's particular relationship to money and property. Rather, marriage moved to the centre of the English novel largely in response to changing relations between the Anglican Church, the English state and the commercial sphere. From the mid-eighteenth century, church and state played a joint role in the regulation of marriage, which was also an occasional topic of contestation between them. At the same time, the marriage ceremony itself was subject to the forces of money and commerce, most notably in so-called clandestine marriage markets where weddings could be bought for cash. Within these contexts, the minutiae of marriage and its ritual – when, where and how weddings were performed, as well as between whom and in whose presence – became matters of intense public interest. So much so, that when Samuel Richardson and his followers made marriage the telos of their fictions, they did so knowing that they were contributing not just

to public debates about the state's role in the regulation of marriage but also to the wider political landscape within which those debates resonated.

Marriage's changing relation to church, state and commerce in eighteenth-century England has important consequences for the history of the novel form. Most obviously, it means the marriage plot needs to be understood as much in relation to political history as to the social, cultural or literary histories within which it has usually been considered. It also means that the marriage plot in its modern form did not emerge as an entirely secular phenomenon: it turns not just on familial struggles and contentions between husbands and wives or parents and children, as is often supposed, but also on alliances and tensions between vicars and squires in the context of the landed estate and the parish.

In this regard, the marriage plot's key context is *English*, not British: it presents not just oblique domestic allegories of political power and authority but also highly charged interventions in matters of church, state and community that shaped everyday life within a particular nation state. Indeed, the Englishness of the English marriage plot can hardly be too much emphasised even as the novel genre was formed within those currents of translation, internationalism and cross-cultural exchange that underpinned eighteenth-century writing more generally.[7] Its national specificity is twofold: it depends on the importance of Anglican ritual to English marriage, and on a quirk in the legislation controlling marriage after 1754 that made it easier to marry in Scotland than in England, a situation that tied marriage practices to national borders in a concrete way.

Yet even as the English marriage plot was anchored in public politics, this interest was expressed indirectly. Early realist novels do not so much reference debates over marriage (although these do feature in some fiction – Oliver Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield*, most famously) as develop key narrative features and structures that channel and respond to those debates in literary terms. Primary amongst these is the marriage plot's distinct characterology, as I call it. The genre develops an interest in particular offices – country vicars and squires – which accompanies, and on occasion rivals, its interest in marriageable young women, often of uncertain social status. Geography too, especially the distance between London and the country estate, and later the Scottish border, helps to structure the genre, as do the dangers of clandestine (or improper) marriage and a correspondent attention to proper wedding ceremony.

The term 'marriage plot', of course, is ambiguous. At one level it means any narrative that ends, or almost ends, in a marriage or marriages and that is largely concerned throughout with courtship. What I am calling the 'modern English marriage plot', however, cannot be reduced to these simple formal features, since narratives ending in happy marriages had been common across many languages for centuries. In prose, they reach back at least as far as Longus's *Daphnis and Chloe*.[8] The modern English marriage plot is not simply a mode of, for instance, Aristotelian comedy, or another of the various kinds of early modern prose fiction romance that often ended in marriage. Charlotte Morgan long ago listed seven such kinds, among which can be counted Eliza Haywood's bestseller, *Love in Excess* (1719), which concludes with no fewer than three marriages, a multiplication of the convention that suggests its purely formal function for amatory fiction of the period.[9]

The English marriage plot belongs, rather, to what was in effect a new genre of fiction, first developed by Samuel Richardson in *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded*, published in 1740. In a now-famous letter to Aaron Hill, Richardson explained his intention 'to introduce a new species of writing that might possibly turn young people into a course of reading different from the pomp and parade of romance-writing'.[10] By 'dismissing the improbable and marvellous, with which novels generally abound', Richardson aimed to 'promote the cause of religion and virtue' (90). Yet his innovation has more readily been understood in literary-historical terms, as authoritatively summarised by Walter Scott in 1821:

> Hitherto, romances had been written, generally speaking in the old French taste, containing the protracted amours of princes and princesses, told in language coldly extravagant, and metaphysically absurd. In these wearisome performances, there appeared not the most distant allusion to the ordinary tone of feeling, the slightest attempt to paint mankind as it exists in the ordinary walks of life – all was rant and bombast, stilt and buskin.[11]

Scott goes on to praise Richardson's representation of 'the natural lineaments of the human countenance' in a manner characteristic of the nationalist, modernising lexicon in which *Pamela* was canonised. His assertion that earlier works were 'in the old French taste' is, of course, misguided. English novelists before Richardson, most notably Delarivier Manley and Daniel Defoe, often claimed to present faithful depictions of the world (or rather of 'History') in contradistinction to flights of heroic

'Fancy'.[12] Indeed, the decades before the publication of *Pamela* saw an extraordinary amount of prose fiction experimentation by women writers in particular – Aphra Behn, Delarivier Manley, Mary Davys, Penelope Aubin and Eliza Haywood – who are now regarded as pioneers of the modern novel, establishing many of the domestic concerns that are relayed into the marriage plot.[13]

Yet Scott's analysis is not wholly to be dismissed. Richardson's novels are in fact closer to the 'ordinary walks of life' than earlier fiction: they are written in the vernacular, they are more psychologically detailed and more able to excite readerly passion by empathetically engaging readers in characters' lives. The excitement, delight and controversy with which they were first received attests indubitably to that.[14] Precisely because Richardson was committed to a mode of Anglican moral reform that could reach new readers, his epistolary mode entails a particular form of immediacy; the sheer succession of letters expresses time as a succession of news, which allows a new sense of subjectivity, contingency and interest to enter the *récit*. These formal innovations are harnessed to a single thematic aim: narrative closure in marriage. Indeed, the features that mark Richardson's *Pamela*, in particular, as a 'true original', to use John Richetti's phrase, and as a founding text of what will come to be called 'realism', depend ultimately on that singularity of focus.[15]

It was in these complex terms, simultaneously moral, formal and historical, that *Pamela* presented a new kind of marriage plot. It tells the story of a rich, libertine squire, Mr B., who, after various attempts at seduction, marries his virtuous servant Pamela, and does so in a *proper* ceremony, that is, one that follows Anglican liturgy (albeit as revised by Pamela herself). This story allows the novel's action and characterology to be organised in the interests of a new social script which, as Ian Watt long ago noted, depends on its presentation of a marriage capable of transforming both its characters' social status and their inner selves.[16] Admittedly, in *Pamela* marriage enacts an interpretative rather than a narratological closure, since the story continues for many pages after its central characters wed, allowing Mr B. and Pamela to engage a number of post-marital challenges. This said, narratological and interpretative closure, marked in an Anglican proper wedding ceremony that legitimates simultaneously social status, states of feeling, Christian virtue and moral worth, will increasingly coalesce in realist novels written after 1740. More than anything, that coalescence defines the English marriage plot.

Eighteenth-Century Marriage and Post-Secularism

During the period in which Richardson wrote his novels, marriage's legal status and social function came under intense examination. In 1753 it was profoundly transformed when Lord Hardwicke's Marriage Act mandated Anglican weddings for all English marriages. It is certainly possible to exaggerate the Marriage Act's impact. After all, there was nothing new about the Anglican wedding ceremony in the eighteenth century; the Act simply gave statuary force to long-standing canon law requirements for Anglican weddings that were widely if not uniformly followed both before and after its introduction.[17] So while the Act changed some of the requirements for parish weddings and closed loopholes available to Dissenters, it did not substantively change the way that most English couples wed.

Yet, precisely as a statuary law mandating a religious rite, the Marriage Act realigned English marriage's relation to church and state, as well as to commerce, property, family and everyday life in England for more than a century. This is so even though – or perhaps because – the Act was introduced against a background of arguments over marriage's theological meaning, administration and liturgical status that reach back to the first days of the English Reformation and beyond.[18] And it is so even though the Act sparked virulent opposition and a long-lasting pamphlet war that I call the 'marriage debate'. That debate politicised marriage in new terms: now part of the apparatus of state, marriage became an important touchstone for emerging forms of political dissent, whether Tory, oppositional Whig, or, later, radical.

In the wake of the Marriage Act's reforms, marriage came to serve a double political function in the English context as both a religious rite *and* a vehicle for the state's administrative power. On one side, it was a performative vow sealed by a ceremony which had usually occurred as a witnessed religious rite (with minor exceptions) and was now legally mandated as an *Anglican* ceremony. At the same time, as regulated by statute, marriage channelled new forms of governmentality focussed on the population's security, health, prosperity and reproduction – what Michel Foucault famously called biopower.[19] Standing at an interface between confessional and secular culture, marriage belonged not to modern enlightened secularism, as has often been assumed, but to 'post-secularism'.

In the work of theorists such as Charles Taylor and Hans Blumenberg the term 'post-secular' refers to a cultural domain in which religious ideas and structures are not wholly superseded by civil-secular ones but rather are reoccupied or repurposed by them.[20] As Brent S. Sirota's recent work on

the transformative effects of Anglican outreach in the period helps to demonstrate, English civil society itself was significantly shaped by Anglican revival efforts, which helped to install Christian social and philanthropic purposes at the heart of British identity.[21] Framed in these terms, and against Habermas's tacitly secularised concept of the emergent 'modern public sphere', the Marriage Act's purposes and effects can be re-described. It harnessed the sacred to the civic for new ends which included modern state- and nation-building.

If eighteenth-century English marriage was post-secular, then so too was the early novel, especially as envisioned by Richardson as a 'new species' of writing dedicated to Anglican outreach. Arguably too, post-secular continuities and disjunctions shaped the English marriage plot and enabled its remarkable versatility and longevity. Marriage's new double function gave it sufficient political energy and signifying force to form the crux of a new literary genre: the realist marriage plot. And by the same logic, the novel's realist marriage plot, for all its subsequent inventiveness, variety and refinement, is never fully secularised, even after the civil marriage provisions of 1836 and even in the hands of revisionary and secular writers later in the century. That is because the genre itself remained embedded in the narrative techniques, settings, characters and devices that underpinned its original missionary purpose.

Political Origins

This book traces the origins and early development of the English marriage plot through four main lines of argument. First, mid-century efforts to mandate *one* legal form for English marriage established the terms for a new prose fiction marriage plot that connected the sacred, the governmental and the civic. Second, distinctions between proper and improper marriage encoded different political understandings of the relations between church, state and population as sanctioned by natural law. Third, these politics shaped the attachment of the marriage plot in early English prose fiction to specific locations, character types and narrative forms as well as to descriptions of proper wedding ceremony. And, last, only after the growth of the commodity fiction market, especially from the 1770s, did the marriage plot (now largely divested of its theo-political interests) enable the realist novel to become precisely a *literary* genre, that is, a genre which positions itself within a literary tradition.

One further context is important to my case. Particularly in its early stages, the English marriage plot develops in the interface between the stage

and print. This means that its history cannot simply be told through the English novel's 'rise' and formal development. It belongs, rather, to a set of recurring real-life questions about marriage regulation and proper wedding ceremony which helped to animate various literary genres and cultural forms, including the theatre. So, my account of the English marriage plot begins not with the novel, nor with proper church ceremony, but with the plebeian public sphere's lively tradition of mock marriages and clandestine weddings. This prehistory is important because it explains what is at stake in the division of 'proper' from 'improper' ceremony that will come to underpin the novel's marriage plot. London's unruly stage and street weddings are a neglected precedent for Richardson's and Fielding's prose fiction marriage plots, which pointedly overwrite them.

Yet even in the context of the novel alone, the English marriage plot is not a unified form. Its eighteenth-century development is discontinuous and uneven precisely because it drew energy and heterogeneity from the political sphere – from Anglican outreach projects, state-building, commercial innovation, radicalism and more. *Pamela*'s Anglican marriage plot is both consolidated and reversed in the gentlemanly 'patriot' theo-political fiction of Richardson's rivals and successors (Henry Fielding, John Shebbeare and Oliver Goldsmith), who anticipate and draw upon political opposition to the Marriage Act. Later in the century, as demands for the Marriage Act's repeal gained traction and drew on radical discourses often directed at women, the marriage plot was transformed again. At this point, a new generation of novelists, spearheaded by Frances Burney and indebted to a late strain of Haywood's fiction, developed courtship plots geared less to political than to moral and literary ends.

Finally, in Austen's fiction, the modern English marriage plot becomes the more narrowly literary form that historians and critics have long supposed it to be. Indeed, her default role as a touchstone for the formal achievements of the realist novel and its marriage plot barely papers over the diversity of the genre Austen mastered or its indebtedness to a century or more of political and religious contention. Austen's fiction exemplifies how the Englishness of the English marriage plot becomes implicit to the novel form after that plot congeals into literary convention and loses full connection to its political origins.

My argument is presented in five chapters. The first chapter, 'Church, State and the Public Politics of Marriage', is straightforwardly historiographical, examining the broad post-1688 theo-political settings in which marriage and prose fiction both changed their form. It outlines the situation in which the Marriage Act of 1753 was passed, paying attention first to

the policies, natural law theories and state-building projects of the Court Whigs who enacted it, and then to the passionate arguments mounted against the Act by churchmen and others. The chapter contends that the tension between church and state that lay at the heart of England's mid-century marriage debate shaped not just the novel form but also politics more widely.

The second chapter, 'Clandestine Marriage, Commerce and the Theatre', examines the London-based trade in irregular marriages that the Marriage Act aimed to suppress and their entangled relation to the popular stage. In London's so-called clandestine marriage market – an unruly space where priests performed wedding ceremonies for cash – the marriage tie was exposed to deception and concealment while also responding to commercial demand. The chapter surveys the history of clandestine marriage and the stage device of 'mock marriage' with which it was twinned and which featured in the oppositional political comedy of John Gay and Henry Fielding. Those plays picture a world institutionally, politically and, indeed, ontologically very different from that of the post-Richardsonian novel. By mid-century, however, both the Marriage Act and the stage Licensing Act of 1737 had reformed the wedding trade and the theatre world, preparing the ground for a new mode of comedy allied to the Richardsonian marriage plot (and to proper ceremony) as spearheaded by David Garrick and George Colman's (ironically titled) Drury Lane hit *The Clandestine Marriage* (1766).

The third chapter, 'The New Fiction: Samuel Richardson and the Anglican Wedding', focusses on Richardson's formal innovations, which, I argue, depend upon his using novelistic fiction as a form of Anglican missionary outreach as well as on his own changing theo-political attachments. It illuminates various features of *Pamela*'s marriage plot: its spiritualisation of courtship; its emphasis on a triangular relation between a vicar, a squire and a literate servant; its setting in a rural parish and landed estate; its relocation of clandestine marriage's disorder; and, finally, its emphasis on proper Anglican wedding ceremony. To make its case, the chapter also offers a reading of *Sir Charles Grandison* (1753–4) and its central characters' carefully described public parish wedding. Richardson's weddings, I contend, are emblematic of a social order in which the novel comes to occupy a new and powerful position mediating religion and the state.

Chapter 4, 'The Patriot Marriage Plot: Fielding, Shebbeare and Goldsmith', explores a specific 'patriot' genealogy for the marriage plot. That genealogy begins in Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and