## For Love or Convenience:

## Women on Marriage in Literature, 1670-1750

## by Ellen McClung

In much of the literature of the first half of the eighteenth century marriage predominates thematically, primarily as a controversy between the marriage of convenience and the love match. A marriage of convenience involves the daughter's unguestioning obedience to parental authority, a duty which consigns her life to the authority of a husband selected by parents usually on the grounds of their own economic advancement. That suitor offering the most advantageous pecuniary increase--or social elevation --wins the hand of the daughter, no matter what his age, character, appearance or reputation and no matter what inclination, yea or nay, the daughter may feel. "As early as the reign of Cnut (1016-1035), a woman was not forced to

marry a man whom she disliked; however, marriage without a guardian's consent might entail loss of her inheritance."(1) Theoretically, perhaps, a woman was not forced to marry against her inclination but in those families where parental authority was not softened by compassion or consideration for the happiness of an individual woman, a daughter's "nay" could entail unbearable parental disfavour. The daughter's unacceptable "nay" to the proposed marriage of convenience is of thematic significance in Arthur Blackamore's Luck at Last (1723), Samuel Richardson's Clarissa (1747), Henry Fielding's Tom Jones (1749) and Amelia (1751), and serves as the basis for Lady Mary Pierrepont's elopement with Mr Wortley Montagu (1712).

Rejecting the favoured suitor was an act of filial disobedience, but marrying without parental consent was disgraceful. Hannah Woolley, at the end of the seventeenth century, said that "of all the acts of disobedience that of marrying against the consent of Parents is the highest. Children are so much the Goods and Chattles of a Parent, that

they cannot without a kind of theft give themselves away without the allowance of those that have the right of them."(2) It would seem that Hannah Woolley's belief in the divine authority of parents is unshakable. Even Lady Mary Pierrepont, during the early years of her secret correspondence with Edward Wortley Montagu, expresses her belief in parental authority, saying "I will never think of any thing without the consent of my Family,"(3) and she urges Wortley to apply to her parents: "Tis only to my Family you must speak. I can now hear no more from you, nor can I make you any other Answer than what they are pleased to direct."(4) "People in my way are sold like slaves, and I cannot tell what price my Master will put on me."(5) Lady Mary is not contumacious until her parents engage her to Clotworthy Skeffington, and she then writes to Wortley: "My Family is resolv'd to dispose of me where I hate. I have made all the Opposition in my power; perhaps 'I have carry'd that opposition too far. However it is, things were carry'd to that height, I have been assur'd of never haveing a shilling, except | comply."(6) Assured of disinheritance should she exercise her right of refusal, Lady Mary has little to lose in eloping with the man she loves. She writes to Wortley:

> I hate the Man they [her family] propose to me. If I did not hate him, my reason would tell me he is not capable of either being my Freind or my Compannion. I have an

Esteem for you, with a mixture of more kindnesse than I imagin'd. That kindnesse would perswade me to abandonn all things for you, my Fame, my Family, the Settlement they have provided for me, and rather embark with you through all the hazards of perhaps finding my selfe reduce'd to the last extremes of Want (which would be heavier on me than any other body) than enjoy the certainty of a plentifull Fortune with another. I can think with pleasure of giveing you with my first declaration of love the sincerest proof of it.(7)

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's experiences -- the unswerving exercise of parental authority in engaging her to a man whom she abhors, the seeming abrogation of her right to refuse, her initial difficulty in overcoming her sense of filial duty, her understanding that daughters are "sold like slaves," her insistence that her husband be "my Freind or my Compannion," her willingness to sacrifice her reputation and her fortune to become the wife of a man she loves, and her elopement resulting from careful ratiocination instead of a hasty romantic impulse--are mirrored in much of the literature of the time. The Spectator papers (1711-1714), Daniel Defoe's essays (1716-1729), the novels of Richardson and Fielding, and Henry Mac-Kenzie's Julia de Roubigné (1777) provide similar reflections. The most important consideration in Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's declaration, however,

is her insistence upon a husband in whom she can find friendship and companionship as well as love.

lan Watt, in The Rise of the Novel, suggests that the evolution from a daughter's obligation to comply with her parents' choice of husband to her own independent choice of husband as friend and lover is attributable to the increasing economic independence of women in the eighteenth century which, in turn, allowed them to express themselves as individuals (complete with souls). The ascendency of the love match would seem to be entwined with women's growing awareness of themselves as individuals, an awareness caused by their increased learning opportunities, their greater literacy, and, possibly, by the unpleasant realization that marriage was not imminent. Ian Watt suggests, "the problem of marriage for women . . . [was] fairly grave, since the large surplus of women in England, and especially in London, which was revealed by the 1801 census was very probably in existence during the whole of the century; such certainly was the common belief."(8) It is a seeming paradix that with a flooded marriage market middle class women should seek friendship and love in a husband and shun the marriage of convenience, but the paradox is easily resolved by considering that, with a woman's growing consciousness of her own identity and individuality, she could no longer consider herself a chattel, as did Hannah

Wooley. She would be loathe to sell herself in a marriage of convenience and might even prefer a single life.

A single life--despite the many satiric innuendoes pointed at the spinster or old maid in many of <u>The Spectator</u> papers and in some of Defoe's essays-was preferred by many women. As early as 1694 Mary Astell in <u>A Serious Pro-</u> <u>posal to the Ladies</u> advocates the right of women to withdraw into her proposed seminary: "For since GOD has given Women as well as Men intelligent Souls, why should they be forbidden to improve them?"(9) Mary Astell's proposition is motivated by her belief that women should be allowed religious retirement:

Let us learn to pride our selves in something more excellent than the invention of a Fashion, and not entertain such a degrading thought of our own worth, as to imagine that our Souls were given us only for the service of our Bodies, and that the best improvement we can make of these, is to attract the Eyes of Men. We value them too much, and our selves too little, if we place any part of our desert in their Opinion, and don't think our selves capable of Nobler Things than the pitiful Conquest of some worthless heart.(10)

•Mary Astell "only claimed for the ladies in her Seminary the right to remain single and to refuse unsuitable marriages."(11) Several times in her letters Lady Mary Wortley Montagu con-

siders remaining single: "Ten thousand pounds is to be settled on me, without its being possible to be recalled by any A single woman may live very well one. on that money. The dispute I have at present with my selfe is whither I will or will not marry at all."(12) Defoe excepts "out of his Buffoonery" those Old Maids "who; either by Religious Vows, or by other private Engagement; by Choice, not Necessity; remain Single and Unwed. These are neither touch'd with the Scandal of having never been asked. or tainted with the Sourness and Moroseness of Humour with which you reproach the OLD MAIDS." Also exempt are those women who "had rather live as they are. than Marry where they cannot Love; that is, in a Word, had rather be completely Happy in the dear Enjoyment of themselves, than completely Miserable in the Bondage and Chains of unsuitable Matrimony, which without doubt. is the worst Condition in the World."(13) Clarissa Harlowe, economically independent due to her inheritance from her grandfather, also wishes for the single life, considering it infinitely preferable to marriage with the repulsive Solmes but also considering it preferable to any marriage. Relating to Anna Howe the contents of one of her letters to Lovelace, Clarissa says: "I had more than once told him that the single life was my choice; and this before Mr Solmes was introduced as a visitor in our family: that Mr Wyerley and other gentlemen knew it to be my choice before himself was acquainted with any of

us."(14) At an early stage in her parental difficulties Clarissa says: "Were ours a Roman Catholic family how much happier for me, that they thought a nunnery would answer all their views!"(15)

Despite these various voices yearning for the single life, Derek Jarrett says that throughout the eighteenth century it was "assumed that marriage and motherhood should be the ultimate qoals of all feminine endeavour. However distinguished a woman's career might be, it could never provide a recognized alternative to the honourable estate of matrimony."(16) "The Case of Celibacy is the great Evil of our Nation,"(17)writes Steele, referring primarily to the large number of bachelors, and, in Rasselas (1759), Princess Nekayah notes that although marriage seems to have many difficulties, "to live without feeling or exciting sympathy, to be fortunate without adding to the felicity of others. or afflicted without tasting the balm of pity, is a state more gloomy than solitude. It is not retreat, but exclusion from mankind. Marriage has many pains, but celibacy has no pleasures."(18) Undoubtedly marriage remained an important goal for women, but the significant point arising from the single life alternative is that, for those women who wished for friendship and love in marriage, the single life was the only alternative; an arranged marriage to a repulsive suitor was inconceivable.

A marriage of convenience was usually arranged for economic advancement. Squire Western, who says "that parents were the best judges of proper matches for their children, that, for his part, he should insist on the most resigned obedience from his daughter."(19) favours the proposed match between Blifil and Sophia since, as he says, "the two estates [of Allworthy and Western] are in a manner joined together in matrimony already, and it would be a thousand pities to part them."(20) Blifil is eligible as Allworthy's heir whereas Tom is completely ineligible, not because of his reputed illegitimacy but because he has no fortune. Solmes' suit is favoured for Clarissa because he has made "noble settlements": "Noble is the word used to enforce the offers of a man who is mean enough avowedly to hate, and wicked enough to propose to rob of their just expectations, his own family. . . in order to settle all he is worth upon me, and if I die without children, and he has none by any other marriage, upon a family which already abounds [the Harlowes]."(21) James Harlowe Jr.'s complicated machinations have manipulated the interests of his father and uncles in his own advancement as an only son for whom, as Clarissa says,

all the real estates in the family: to wit, my grandfather's, father's, and two uncles', and the remainder of their respective personal estates, together with what he had an expectation of from his godmother, would make such a noble fortune, and give him such an interest, as might entitle him to hope for a peerage. Nothing less would satisfy his ambition.(22)

James, manipulating the paternal authority, thus determines Clarissa's fate, marrying her to the repulsive Solmes, or, as James hopes, goading her into some disgraceful action, in which event she would abrogate all family favour.

In her correspondence with Philippa Mundy, Lady Mary Pierrepont cleverly denotes three types of marriage: Paradise, Hell, and Limbo. Robert Halsband notes that "in the private language used by the two young ladies, Paradise meant being married to a man one loved, Hell to a man one detested, and Limbo or Purgatory to a man one merely tolerated."(23) In writing Philippa Mundy about the arranged marriage with Clotworthy Skeffington, Lady Mary says:

I confesse to you the Suplications of Paradice [meaning Wortley], and the Pain I saw him in, at length rais'd my Spirit to oppose vigorously my progresse to Hell, but all my Opposition was vain, and all the Difference I could obtain was makeing it yet worse. Instead of going I shall be drag'd to the lowest of Hells, without the pleasure of satisfying Paradise, who would perswade me to continue Resisting. (24) She ultimately eludes Hell and gains Paradise by eloping. Sylvia, of Arthur Blackamore's Luck at Last (1723), considers that the only way to escape Hell

--marriage to Stertorius--is literally to escape her house and parents. She reasons that although she owes her father her duty,

duty does not oblige to impossibilities. I cannot love Stertorius. . . . I have an aversion to him, and there's no uniting of antipathies. But my father will have it so. . . . You must cast yourself into the hated embraces of an old lecher or disobey your father. 'Tis a hard dilemma. O Heavens, what shall I do? Are we not all born free? Have we not the liberty of bestowing our affections where we please? . . . Will it be disobedience if I fly for it? It can't. No parent ought to be so cruel. . . I had rather they should never see me more than see me in the arms of old Stertorius. (25)

Sylvia escapes her Hell, lives as a vagabond, and eventually becomes part of a household where she works from scullion to lady's companion. She ultimately finds her Paradise in Philaretus whose affection for her

> proceeded from a chaste love, wholly guided by reason, and vastly distant from any tincture of lust, for where pure love dwells, no lust can find reception. Philaretus did not love Sylvia only because he had seen her, but because he imagined more than common virtues to be in her. . . .(26)

It is significant that Philaretus' love is chaste, and "wholly guided by reason." Once women decided a marriage of convenience was unsatisfactory and sought a love match instead, they seem to have experienced some difficulty in distinguishing love from lust and romantic fancy. In Nicholas Rowe's <u>The Fair Pentitent</u> (1703), Calista misinterprets Lothario's lust for love; having been willingly seduced by him, she is distraught in discovering he will not offer marriage. Lothario is himself a stranger to "chaste love," subscribing to the rake's creed rather than to the honourable lover's; he says to Rossano:

- Since I resolv'd, that Love and Peace of Mind Might flourish long inviolate betwixt us,
- Never to load it with the Marriage Chain;
- That I would still retain her in my Heart,
- My ever gentle Mistress, and my Friend;
- But for those other Names of Wife and Husband,
- They only meant Ill-nature, Cares, and Quarrels.(27)

Lovelace's beliefs are almost identical to Lothario's. Lovelace, were he ever to marry, would demand that his wife literally worship him; "I would have the woman whom I honour with my name, if ever I confer this honour upon any, forgo even her <u>superior duties</u> for me,"(28) superior duties supposedly referring to religious devotion. His ego requires unceasing round-the-clock sub-

servience. Like Lothario and many others who mistake lust for love, or who are unable to comprehend virtuous love, Lovelace believes that variety and novelty in love are essential. (29) In the words of Loveless of Cibber's Love's Last Shift (1695), "the World to me is a Garden stockt with all sorts of Fruit, where the greatest Pleasure we can take, is in the Variety of Taste; But a Wife is an Eternal Appletree; after a pull or two, you are sure to set your Teeth on Edge."(30) Sir John Galliard, the rake in Mary Davys' The Accomplished Rake (1727), echoes Lothario, Loveless and Lovelace:

a husband is a d---d name for a man that hates confinement and loves variety as much as I do. Beside, marriage is the direct road to indifference, where we travel a few days and then strike into that of hatred, variance, strife, noise, and the D---l and all. No, madam, if we design to love, let us live single. A man may preserve an appetite that takes only a snack bye the bye, but a full meal very often gorges the stomach and turns to loathing and surfeit.(31)

A woman who misinterpreted a lover's lust for honourable love was in trouble. Unlike Calista, Clarissa suffers no delusions as to the nature of Lovelace's love, recognizing him as a rake of dishonourable intentions. In <u>Amelia</u> Fielding portrays Colonel James as a man with rakish inclinations, but wiley Miss Bath captures James in marriage:

The truth was, as James had married out of a violent liking of, or appetite to, her person, possession had surfeited him, and be was now grown so heartily tired of his wife, that she had very little of his company; she was forced therefore to content herself with being the mistress of a large house and equipage in the country ten months in the year by herself. (32) The marriage satisfies Mrs James, however, since "she had never had any violent affection for James" and had married him for his monev. (33)

Mr Tipkin's niece in Sir Richard Steele's <u>The Tender Husband</u> (1704) exemplifies the woman who yearns for a romantic, courtly lover. Although the niece responds to the quixotic lovemaking of the versatile Captain Clerimont, she is not so steeped in romance that she rushes into hasty marriage without discent: she cause to Cleriment.

without dissent; she says to Clerimont: No! I never yet read of a knight that entered tilt or tournament after wedlock--'Tis not to be expected--When the husband begins, the hero ends; all that noble impulse to glory, all the generous passion for adventures is consumed in the nuptial torch; I don't know how it is, but Mars and Hymen never hit it.(34)

It is an interesting correspondence that the romance-reading niece expects love in marriage to be just as fleeting as the libertines Lothario, Loveless, Galliard and Lovelace expect.

Rasselas capsulates the problem of marriageswhich are hastily contracted because of lust disguised as love, or romantic fancy, or of the instigation of eager parents:

I cannot forbear to flatter myself that prudence and benevolence will make marriage happy. The general folly of mankind is the cause of general complaint. What can be expected but disappointment and repentance from a choice made in the immaturity of youth, in the ardor of desire, without judgment, without foresight, without inquiry after conformity of opinions, similarity of manners, rectitude of judgment, or purity of sentiment? Such is the common process of marriage. A youth and maiden, meeting by chance or brought together by artifice, exchange glances, reciprocate civilities, go home, and dream of one another. Having little to divert attention or diversify thought, they find themselves uneasy when they are apart, and therefore conclude that they shall be happy together. They marry, and discover what nothing but voluntary blindness before had concealed: they wear out life in altercations, and charge nature with cruelty. (35) Such marriages as the one Rasselas describes seem to have thrived in the early eighteenth century (and to have continued into 1976), caused by an in-

ability to distinguish love or to comprehend marriage. The "solution" which seems to emerge in early eighteenth century dramas, essays, letters and novels, is, to use Johnson's words but in a positive sense, that a spouse must be chosen by the individual concerned, with judgment, with foresight, with inquiry after conformity of opinions, similarity of manners, rectitude of judgment and purity of sentiment; in short, a successful marriage is based on friendship and companionship, "chaste love wholly guided by reason," as Philaretus says. Richardson himself believed "that 'friendship. . . is the perfection of love', [and] defined marriage as 'the highest state of friendship that mortals can know.'''(36)

In Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's letters, <u>The Spectator</u>, Richardson's <u>Pamela</u> and <u>Clarissa</u> and Fielding's <u>Tom Jones</u> and <u>Amelia</u> there are many references to the importance of friendship in marriage. Lady Mary Pierrepont, writing to Wortley in 1711, attempts to explain the nature of happiness in marriage:

Happynesse is the natural design of all the World, and every thing we see done, is meant in order to attain it. My Imagination places it in Freindship. By Freindship I mean an intire Communication of thoughts, wishes, Interests, and Pleasures being undivided, a mutual Esteem, which naturally carrys with it a pleasing sweetnesse of conversation, and terminates in the desire of makeing one or Another happy. . . I rather chuse to use the word Freindship than Love because in the general Sense that word is spoke, it signifies a Passion rather founded on Fancy than Reason, and when I say Freindship I mean a mixture of Tendernesse and Esteem, and which a long acquaintance encreases not decays.(37)

Lady Mary's caution with love and her stress on friendship reappear in Clarissa. Clarissa writes to Anna: "Marriage is the highest state of friendship: if happy, it lessens our cares by dividing them, at the same time that it doubles our pleasure by a mutual participation."(38) Clarissa stresses the necessity of friendship and virtuous love in marriage to such an extent that she will marry on no other grounds. The Spectator expresses an opinion both Lady Mary and Clarissa would approve: "I cannot be perswaded but that the Passion a Bridegroom has for a virtuous young woman, will, by little and little, grow into Friendship, and then it is ascended to a higher Pleasure than it was in its first Fervour."(39) Lady Mary and Clarissa seem more intent upon ensuring the germ of friendship exists before they engage in matrimony whereas The Spectator (with a man's point of view) seems confident that friendship will arise from the bridegroom's passion for a virtuous young woman. Pamela, recording "rules" from her husband B's "awful lecture," notes that "Wives and Husbands are or should be Friends."(40) Mr Allworthy of Tom Jones says: "I have always

thought love the only foundation of happiness in a married state; as it can only produce that high and tender friendship which should always be the cement of this union."(41) Allworthy consistently maintains this point of view, refusing to sanction the marriage of Blifil and Sophia until assured both are eager for the match. In <u>Amelia</u>, Booth, waxing eloquent on marital bliss with Amelia, says:

Our lives resembled a calm sea . . . I know. . . it must appear dull in description, for who can describe the pleasures which the morning air gives to one in perfect health; the flow of spirits which springs up from exercise; the delights which parents feel from the prattle and innocent follies of their children; the joy with which the tender smile of a wife inspires a husband; or lastly, the chearful, solid comfort which a fond couple enjoy in each other's conversation?(42)

Pamela, Sophia, and Amelia are all virtuous young women in whom the sincere bridegrooms B, Tom and Booth can find friendship in "Paradise."

In asserting their right to choose a husband on the grounds of companionship, women, attempting to distinguish love from lust and romantic fancy, often equated love with virtue. The prevailing idea seems to be that happiness in marriage results from virtue--meaning fidelity and philanthropy--as well as friendship. In recounting to Belford a conversation with Clarissa, Lovelace repeats her words: "But, sir, let me tell you that the married state, in my eye, is a state of purity, and [I think she told me] not of licentiousness; so, at least, I understood her. Marriage purity, Jack! Very comical, 'faith." (43) Lovelace is completely unable to comprehend the nature of Clarissa's virtue, an inability which increases the tragic tones of Clarissa, for Lovelace always thinks that marriage is the trump card with which he can expiate all his sins with Clarissa in her eyes and in the eyes of the world. After the rape, the "world"--Lord M, Lady Sarah, Lady Betty, Charlotte and Patty Montague, Colonel Morden, Mrs Norton, Mrs Howe, Hickman and even Anna Howe-side with Lovelace in urging Clarissa to marry him. But Clarissa's concept of her own virtue is such that, once sullied, there can be no worldly repar-The final couplet of The Fair ation. Penitent, spoken by Horatio, stresses the importance of virtue in marriage: "If you would have the Nuptial Union last, /Let Virtue be the bond that ties it fast,"(44) virtue in this instance meaning, specifically, fidelity. l n Cibber's Love's Last Shift, Amanda, deserted by her husband Loveless for ten years, says: "All the comfort of my Life is, that I can tell my Conscience, I have been true to Virtue." (45) Blackamore in Luck at Last, writing of Sylvia's and Philaretus' married happiness, says:

To a virtuous disposition there are no charms like the charms of vir-

tue, no attractions like them. . . . Such a treasure is inestimable and cannot be prized enough. A love grounded upon such a basis can never miscarry; it is founded upon right reason; and the effect of wedlock concluded upon such a bottom is the most solid happiness this world can produce.(46)

Clarissa's refusal to marry Lovelace, her seducer, is just since their marriage would not be founded on virtue and could not produce "the most solid happiness." Loveless and Amanda, Philaretus and Sylvia, B and Pamela, Joseph and Fanny, Tom and Sophia, Amelia and Booth all eventually find happiness in marriage based on friendship and virtuous love. Lovelace, to whom virtuous love is a perpetual conundrum, is not worthy of Clarissa, since, as A.B. says in The Spectator No. 268. "Nothing but the good Qualities of the Person beloved, can be a Foundation for a Love of Judgment and Discretion; and whoever expect Happiness from any Thing but Virtue, Wisdom, Good-humour, and a Similitude of Manners, will find themselves widely mistaken."(47)

In The Spectator No. 149, the "Marriagelife" is described as "always an insipid, a vexatious, or an happy Condition,"(48) categories synonymous with Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's Hell, Limbo and Paradise.

The happy Marriage is, where two Persons meet and voluntarily make Choice of each other, without

principally regarding or neglecting the Circumstances of Fortune or Beauty. . . . When you have a true Notion of this sort of Passion. your humour of living great will vanish out of your Imagination, and you will find Love has nothing to do with State. Solitude, with the Person beloved, has a Pleasure. even in a Woman's Mind, beyond Show or Pomp. You are therefore to consider which of your Lovers will like you best undress'd, which will bear with you most when out of Humour, and your way to this is to ask of your self, which of them you value most for his own Sake? and by that judge which gives the greater Instances of his valuing you for your self only.(49)

For Clarissa there is no happy Marriage, no earthly Paradise, because of the dishonourable machinations of her brother and of Lovelace, neither valuing her as a virtuous young woman. Clarissa believes in the ideal of a "happy Marriage" and will not compromise herself in either the "insipid" or the "vexatious" marriage, the marriage of convenience. Marriage, Clarissa says, is "for my whole life! . . . Shall I not therefore be allowed to judge for myself, whether I can, or cannot live happily with him? . . . Marriage is a very solemn engagement,"(50) and one in which she will have no part unless friendship and virtuous love characterize the relationship with the man of her choice.

Murial Williams in speaking of Fielding says:

Marriage, as practiced for mercenary gain, he saw as a game in which two people cheated each other of everything they could. He emphasized his heroines' right principles in marrying on the basis of the merit of the partner, not his social status. A corresponding emphasis was placed on the heroines' superiority of mind and character rather than physical beauty as the source of their greatest attraction. The goodness of the object is the ultimate source of happiness in love. (51)

This assessment of Fielding's attitude is equally applicable to Richardson, and expresses their essential stance on marriage. Yet despite their efforts, and the efforts of many other writers of the early eighteenth century, in favour of friendship and virtuous love as the bases of a happy marriage, the Mrs Bennets abounded well into the nineteenth century, subscribing to the "truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. ... "(52) The marriage of convenience for economic or social advancement was not vanguished.

NOTES

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