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Plotting the Marriage Plot in a Postmodern World

In the first few pages of Ian McEwan's novel *Atonement*, the reader is given a brief synopsis of young Briony Tallis's short play "The Trials of Arabella" given by the creator of the production herself:

The reckless passion of the heroine, Arabella, for a wicked foreign count is punished by ill fortune when she contracts cholera during an impetuous dash toward a seaside town with her intended. Deserted by him and nearly everybody else, bed-bound in a garret, she discovers in herself a sense of humor. Fortune presents her a second chance in the form of an impoverished doctor—in fact, a prince in disguise who has elected to work among the needy. Healed by him, Arabella chooses judiciously this time, and is rewarded by reconciliation with her family and a wedding with the medical prince on 'a windy sunlit day in spring.' (McEwan 3-4).

This summary is just as nuanced as the seven-page-long play, which does not say much good about Briony's childhood literary skill; however, "The Trials of Arabella" and the novel within the novel that Briony later writes as an adult carry on the literary tradition of the marriage plot

like Jane Austin, Henry James, George Eliot, and others before and after them. The marriage plot is also one of the core elements of Jeffrey Eugenides's novel *The Marriage Plot*, which starts with a long-winded list of Madeleine Hanna's collection of various English authors renowned for their romantic plotlines that end with a "happily-ever-after" marriage. Throughout the novel, Madeleine struggles to find a balance between the conservative, romantic ideas she grew up reading and the ever-expanding, liberating modern world she lives in. In both *Atonement* and *The Marriage Plot*, the love story presented to the reader is deconstructed and torn apart by the final page, as Briony reveals that the lovers Cecelia and Robbie died before they could reunite and as Madeleine chooses neither to pursue the brilliant-but-bipolar Leonard nor to fall into the arms of the wandering pilgrim Mitchell. By defying the conventions of the marriage plot, both novels jar the reader into an awareness that life and love, contrary to the literary tradition, do not always end with a marriage that lasts happily ever after.

The literary tradition of the modern marriage plot can be traced to roughly 1740, the year that Samuel Richardson published his novel *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded* (O'Connell 384). Before the 18th century, marriage was seen as just another fact of life in English culture. Literature would occasionally remind its readers that marriage was sacred, but there were a wealth of stories produced about scandalous love affairs in the courts of kings and queens. These courtly love stories often breached the covenant of marriage for the sake of passionate, though at times "illicit, secret, demeaning, and ultimately disastrous" for the lovers (Jeffrey 516). One of the most notable of these tales is the story of the knight Lancelot and Queen Guinevere, the wife of King Arthur. This particular event has been told and retold numerous times, but Sir Thomas Malory wrote of it best when he wrote, "And whether they were abed or at other manner of disports, me list not thereof make no mention, for love that time was not as love is nowadays"

(485). And this was written in 1469! In today's world, we would typically view such adulterous behavior as wicked and sinful, and even back then there might have been some who saw Lancelot's affair with Guinevere as unholy behavior for a Knight of the Round Table. Yet, Malory implores us to know that "love that time was not as love is nowadays," as if there is something missing from the puzzle that we of the modern age (well, "modern" as in the 1460s!) have forgotten about.

Let's look back at the situation of marriage before the 1700s then. As I have stated before, marriage was pretty commonplace in England, but I neglected to mention that there was no real standard for what constituted marriage or who could be married. Many couples would secretly marry under the veil of night or at a secluded location. Licenses may or may not have been issued, depending on the class of the couple, and there were very few barriers preventing those who desired marriage from obtaining a priest's blessings. Even if the couple lived in an area that required licenses, they could simply find a different spot to have a clandestine marriage, where "nothing need be arranged beforehand, [and] one could still marry on any day of one's choosing, with privacy guaranteed" (Newton 5). This changed with the introduction of the Marriage Act of 1753.

The Marriage Act wove the power of the state and the jurisdiction of the Church of England together to regulate marriage. As O'Connell states, the Marriage Act made it "impossible to be legally married in England without undergoing an Anglican wedding ceremony on consecrated ground during appointed hours" (387). The act also enforced "strict procedures for banns, licences and registration, transportation sentences for parsons in violation of the Act, and, in the case of minors married by licence without the written consent of their parents or guardians, nullity provisions that allowed the state to override the church-sanctioned

vow” (O’Connell 387). Note how the idea of love is not even present in the legislation. The Marriage Act was not focused on ensuring that people married for love or for the right reasons, but it instead condensed the ritual of marriage into a more “utilitarian, public function” (Langendries 9). This is a stark contrast to the traditional courtly love stories that boasted private and romantic experiences outside the realm of regulations and law.

The idea of love and marriage had not really been connected to one another until the 18th century. While there are sources that show lovers finding love and being wed, the literary tradition tended to focus on “an active pursuit of passion” such as that of an illicit affair (Langendries 9). The culture that helped create the Marriage Act of 1753, however, began to merge love and marriage into a single entity. The titular character of Richardson’s *Pamela*, for example, rejects the courtly love of Mr. B in an attempt to maintain her virtue. She instead requests that they have “a church wedding—telling B. that the ‘Holy Rite’ ought to be performed in a ‘Holy Place’” (O’Connell 394). This novel was written roughly a decade before the Marriage Act, yet its message is very similar. To be wed in England in the 1700s, one must do it correctly. It is this notion that is carried out through the years in the works of Jane Austen, Henry James, George Eliot, and others.

These “marriage plots,” as they come to be known, revolve around “heterosexual love and courtship culminating in marriage,” as Mary-Catherine Harrison describes them (113). The more famous ones managed to weave in other important topics such as politics, economics, and the role of family, all of which can be found in the works of Austen or Eliot’s *Middlemarch*. These stories have even influenced how we currently see love, marriage, and sex as “they provide the models for the marriages we still desire” (Harrison 113). Modern romantic comedies, soap operas, and novels still possess an aspect that drives the reader to ask, to no one in

particular, “Will this couple pair up or break up?” It is almost as if these stories were trying to “put an end to thought” by answering the question for the reader at end of the work (Psomiades 53). There are occasions in which the marriage plot story is more complex than a simple “won’t they or will they” scenario. In some cases, readers are presented with *failed* marriage plots in which “marriage produces tension and conflict rather than resolving it” (Harrison 114).

An excellent example of a failed marriage plot can be found in Eliot’s *Middlemarch*. By the end of the novel, there have been two notable failed marriages. The first is of Dorothea and Casaubon, and the second is between Lydgate and Rosamond. Dorothea had married Casaubon under the impression that this learned man would educate her about the ways of the world, but his dream of having a subservient and simple wife caused Dorothea to fall into depression and loneliness. Lydgate, likewise, wanted to learn about the biology of the human body, and he had hoped that he could set up a practice in Middlemarch to further his craft. After marrying Rosamond, he had to put his desires behind and take care of his new family instead. Both of these marriages end in death, not divorce, as both Casaubon and Lydgate both die and free their loved ones from the bonds of matrimony. The story does not end so depressingly, however, as Dorothea manages to find love again with the artistic Will, a marriage described by Eliot as “a love stronger than any impulses which could have marred it” (835). Even in a failed marriage plot, the story ends at least somewhat happily.

The same cannot be said of Eugenides’s *The Marriage Plot*. The title comes from Madeleine’s fascination with the novels of English authors such as Austen, Eliot, and Henry James. Her interest in these stories drives her to become an English major during the 1980s, the heyday of deconstructionist theorists like Derrida and Barthes in academia. In a class titled “The

Marriage Plot,” Dr. Saunders launches into a heated argument about the declining power of the novel in society:

In Saunders’s opinion, the novel had reached its apogee with the marriage plot and had never recovered from its disappearance. In the days when success in life had depended on marriage, and marriage depended on money, novelists had a subject to write about. The great epics sang of war, the novel of marriage. Sexual equality, good for women, had been bad for the novel. And divorce had undone it completely. (Eugenides 21)

This lecture energized Madeleine, who then begins to work on a thesis paper on the decline of the marriage plot in literature. Unfortunately, she “had a fuzzy, unsystematic way of talking about books” as she lacks any sort of critical theory to help guide her, a problem that is resolved with her introduction to Barthes’s *A Lover’s Discourse* (Eugenides 23).

This deconstruction of the cultural construct of love ironically constructs a theory of love for Madeleine. Her need for some sort of salvation from her failed love life leads her to read the words of Barthes, someone who “encourages readers to rethink their relationship with love not only theoretically or historically but emotionally as well, to sweep aside the sentimental fluff that has accrued to the concept of love in the popular imagination,” and makes it her rulebook for how she will find love (Savu 5). It does not matter if Barthes is trying to shake her out of conventional thought because the convention is what she desires. She wants the Victorian romance where “the fictional ideal of marriage is defined by happiness, not hard work, by constancy, not change” (Harrison 119).

Sadly, Madeleine does not get this happy ending. Her romance and subsequent marriage to Leonard both collapse horribly as Leonard's manic-depression proves to be far too stressful on both of them. In her pursuit of a happily-ever-after ending, she "never accepted—had never taken fully on board—the reality of Leonard's illness" or the lack of treatment options available to him (Eugenides 363). Here is a man who oscillates between periods of intense energy and endless lethargy, almost becoming two different people. What Madeleine had wanted to marry was the Leonard she saw in college and fictionalized within her mind: the tortured soul who listened to her problems and her stories and was on the verge of success. The reality was that, unlike Jane Austen's novels, their story does not simply stop after they wed. They have to deal with the fact that their marriage "rests on a shaky foundation, riddled with problems to which no brilliant solution exists" (Savu 11).

In a twist, it is Leonard who ends their relationship, not Madeleine. In his view of things, he is a failure. He was relegated to menial tasks at the research facility during his fellowship, struggles with impotence brought upon by lithium pills, and begins to feel unmanly in Madeleine's presence. When they go to New York to find an apartment, for example, Leonard complains that he would not be capable of paying for it himself. "If I were the man," Madeleine quips, "we wouldn't even be talking about this. It would be normal for the husband to pay more rent." But, Leonard replies, "The fact that I feel like the wife here is sort of the problem" (Eugenides 373). On the way back home, he tells her, "I divorce thee," before jumping onto a train without her (Eugenides 382). This is his way of freeing her from the illusions they both shared about their marriage. She cannot fix him, and he cannot be fixed.

And yet, the book still does not end here. The marriage may have failed, but the heroine must be redeemed if the novel is to follow the traditional marriage plots of old. From the

beginning, it appears as if Mitchell Grammaticus will be the answer to all of Madeleine's problems. He matches her intelligence without overshadowing her like Leonard does, he is an avid reader as well, and at one time they almost became an item when Madeleine approached him during his stay at her house. His shyness and misinterpretation of events are nothing new for the genre, but he takes their relationship a step too far when he begins to irrationally believe that they are destined to be together. He even begins to wonder about this fantasy himself, as he thinks to himself, "How long had he been secretly hoping to marry Madeleine Hanna? And how much of his desire to Madeleine came from really and truly liking her as a person, and how much from the wish to possess her and, in so doing, gratify his ego?" (Eugenides 160). This could easily be seen as a form of meta-fiction, as Mitchell is almost acutely aware that, in a marriage plot scenario, he would be the second suitor to save Madeleine from the first.

Just before the final pages, Madeleine and Mitchell do consummate their affection for one another, and the story could have easily ended at that point. Mitchell's religious travels to forget Madeleine before this moment, conversely, have opened his eyes to the truth:

Suddenly, as if he was truly in touch with his Deep Self and could view his situation objectively, Mitchell understood why making love with Madeleine had felt as strangely empty as it had. It was because Madeleine hadn't been coming to him; she'd only been leaving [Leonard]. After opposing her parents all summer, Madeleine was giving in to the necessity of an annulment. In order to make that clear to herself, she'd come up to Mitchell's bedroom in the attic. He was her survival kit. (Eugenides 405)

This leads him to make a rather bold statement to her afterwards, in which he asks, "Was there any novel where the heroine gets married to the wrong guy and then realizes it, and then the

other suitor...realizes that the last thing the woman needs is to get married again...?" (Eugenides 405-406). He recognizes that the woman he thought he had been in love with had changed drastically since he first met her, but, more importantly, he knows that she has to break away from the literary conventions. Her marriage plot has to end with independence and not marriage. Eugenides himself commented on this, saying, "But [the marriage plot] is still playing out in our heads. Because by reading these books and seeing all the movies that they gave rise to, we have certain expectations about love, romance, and marriage that are still affecting how we behave. So the marriage plot is really a received ideal of romance... just as strong and confining in its way as the iron-clad religious structures used to be (qt. in Harrison 126). Marriage had been the subject of so many novels that "their audience [knew] exactly what it liked according to the formula it knew and anticipated" (Schwartz 43). *The Marriage Plot* "ends not with a wedding... but by raising doubts about both the value of marriage and the value of plots" (Franklin 31).

Where *The Marriage Plot* chose to shatter tradition, *Atonement* gives readers some semblance of a happily-ever-after ending before pulling the rug out from under them. As stated earlier, Briony was enthralled with the fiction of her age, but she could not be content like Madeleine by simply reading these works. Briony had to create her own stories using the only subject she deemed worthy: marriage. When her brother Leon announces his return, Briony churns out *The Trials of Arabella*, but she does so for a purely literary purpose, as "[t]he piece was intended to inspire not laughter, but terror, relief, and instruction, in that order" (McEwan 8). She does not wish to evoke only admiration from her brother as much as she wants to "guide him away from his careless succession of girlfriends, toward the right form of wife, the one who would persuade him to return to the countryside, the one who would sweetly request Briony's services as a bridesmaid" (4). On the surface, this seems a tad selfish. Why else would a young

girl try to get her brother to get married other than to be *in* the wedding itself? Yet, this is meant to illustrate that, like Madeleine, Briony has internalized the fictional marriage plots and arranges her world to become one “as a corrective to the untidiness of life” (O’Hara 76).

Interestingly, Briony’s fascination with stories has a precedent in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, a portion of which is the epigraph to *Atonement*. McEwan summarizes Austen’s book as the story of “a girl so full of the delights of Gothic fiction that she causes havoc around her when she imagines a perfectly innocent man to be capable of the most terrible things” (qt. in Wells 102). This is “both a warning and a guide” to *Atonement* as Briony mistakenly believes that Robbie, who has started a relationship with her sister Cecelia, is the man who attacked her cousin Lola (Finney 70). It is this mistake that is the catalyst for the rest of the events of the novel and the primary target of Briony’s search for atonement, hence the novel’s title.

In the third act of the novel, Briony reunites with her sister Cecelia and the wounded Robbie, who has returned from World War II a stern and angst-filled man. At least, that is how Briony portrays him. As the epilogue (which appears to be Briony’s own thoughts but could easily have been a journal entry) explains, the entirety of *Atonement* is her atonement for the mistake she made as a child. Part One shows the reader the circumstances that led her to make the accusation and her interpretation of what actually transpired. Part Two sends the reader to WWII-era France to follow Robbie as he awaits on the shores of Dunkirk for the ship that leads home. She even goes so far as to have him “[keep] thinking of Cecilia, the woman he loves, and the memories of their brief moment of intimacy” in order to “give him the strength to move on,” as if he were the protagonist of an odyssey facing Hell itself to get back home (Sibisan 115). Part Three shows how Briony had been attempting to care for those soldiers who did make it home

and also shows the reuniting of Robbie and Cecilia, neither of whom forgive Briony for her misdeeds. This meeting never actually happened, Briony tells us, because “Robbie Turner died of septicemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1940” and “Cecilia was killed in September of the same year by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground station” (McEwan 350). Briony invented both Cecilia and Robbie for Parts Two and Three, and she took quite a few liberties with them in Part One.

Why, then, does Briony feel compelled to tell the reader a lie? “The answer is simple,” as Briony writes, because all she wants is for “the lovers to survive and flourish” just like Arabella and her prince (McEwan 350). She even describes the pair in the words she used long ago, calling Cecilia “spontaneous, fortuitous” and Robbie a “medical prince” (350). This was the story she wanted to tell, and it was the story that, in her mind, should have happened if the world was like an English novel. The public in her world will only see those first three parts, and they will finish reading the marriage plot of *Atonement* sated and happy that the star-crossed lovers lived happily ever after. In our reality, McEwan made sure that this last snippet of Briony’s thoughts was attached to show us that life is full of unrequited and unconsummated love. The lovers may have been together in Briony’s mind, but they were buried in separate graves.

Both *The Marriage Plot* and *Atonement* end with a defiance of the literary tradition of the marriage plot by the authors. Briony creates a false world in her mind where the mistake she made led to something better and not to nothingness. Madeleine, Leonard, and Mitchell all discover that marriage is not always the answer to life’s problems. In both cases, the issue of the marriage plot’s relevance in modern society is brought up and judged. *Atonement* declares it necessary for hiding the painful truths of life, and *The Marriage Plot* deems them outdated and false. Yet, they both end with an uncertain ending, for the reader no longer knows what is to

come. If either of these followed the traditional route, the reader would know that the marriage ceremony would signal the end of the story. Since neither do, the reader is left confused at the messy, unclean look at life that sits upon the pages of these texts.

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