WEDDED WIFE

A Feminist History of Marriage

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First published in the UK in 2023 by Aurum
An imprint of The Quarto Group

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www.Quarto.com/Aurum

Cover design by Terri Sirma
Text designed and set in Adobe Garamond Premier Pro by Jeremy Tilston

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-0-7112-6711-4
E-book ISBN: 978-0-7112-6713-8
Audiobook ISBN: 978-0-7112-6914-9

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Love is giving, marriage is buying and selling. You can't put love into a contract.

– *MARGARET ATWOOD*, **THE BLIND ASSASSIN**

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PREFACE

Do not marry at all … You will be wiser not to chance it, it isn't worth the risk.

– SUFFRAGE POSTER, SIGNED 'A SUFFRAGETTE WIFE'[1]

Imagine being a fully grown woman and promising to obey another person. In all things. Until you die. Imagine being required to make that promise publicly, with no expectation of it being reciprocated. And then being forced to keep it.

A quick glance back at the history of marriage tends to lead us to agree with the suffragette who advised that, surely, 'it isn't worth the risk'. Marriage has a long, dark history of oppressing women and excluding diverse couples. In the 1970s, a feminist campaign was launched in Britain asking the question, 'YBA Wife?'[2] It asked if it were possible, or even desirable, for marriage to be redeemed.

In the UK, around 250,000 new marriages take place every year.[3] Half a million people join the club. Despite the fact that over 40 per cent of marriages end in divorce, half of the population over sixteen in the United Kingdom today are married.[4] Many more have been or will be. Though people are living single for longer, the vast majority still choose to marry at some point within their lifetimes. In the United States, around 48 per cent of adults are married today[5] and nearly two-thirds of all Americans have joined the institution at some point.[6] So, what is it that makes us return, generation after generation, to this institution?

My wife and I walked down the aisle together just three years after same-sex marriages started to be legally practised in England and Wales. Like so many couples, we did not spend a great deal of time deeply interrogating our motivations for marriage. Making the choice with the heart, rather than the head. Getting married provided an opportunity to commit to each other in a serious way.

There are not many choices that we make and imagine should last a lifetime. Not a lot that we expect to be or do forever. In the UK, we change jobs on average every five years.[7] In the US, every four years.[8] We move house roughly every twenty.[9] By the time I had married, I had already lived in thirteen homes. Similarly, people often have several relationships in a lifetime. Marriage, though, is a way of saying *this is different* to each other, and to everyone else. Of finding an anchoring relationship in a transient world.

Some motivations to marry are romantic, others more pragmatic. My wife and I made the decision to marry alongside the choice to become parents. Making a public and symbolic commitment before a deeply practical one. For my wife, being married meant that she would be acknowledged as the parent of our children when they were born, without jumping through legal hoops and navigating additional paperwork.

When we made the decision to marry, I knew I wanted a public celebration. A wedding. Eloping would have made much more financial sense for us at the time, but, unlike my fiancée, I was not very tempted. I had been a bridesmaid six times before my own wedding, a guest at countless others.

Weddings provide moments of connection beyond the couple at the centre, out into your community at that moment in time and back through time as you retrace and relive the experiences and choices of generations before. Girls are brought up to aspire to a wedding at every stage of our development. The expectation is profoundly limiting, it can

be deeply harmful, and it's hard to totally shake off that level of social conditioning. Maybe it just got to me.

A wedding, however big or small, marks a change. It is easy to let the significant moments and relationships in our lives pass quietly, uncelebrated and unacknowledged. That was not what I wanted. For same-sex and queer couples, for people whose relationships have not been recognized before, public acknowledgement can bring a particular power and importance. There is a poignancy in publicly celebrating and rejoicing in relationships that have long been actively persecuted.

In 2004, the UK government passed the Civil Partnership Act. It sought to remove the financial, legal and technical inequalities faced by same-sex couples, unable to marry – couples prevented from accessing the wide range of benefits and rights enjoyed by opposite-sex spouses. However, very explicitly and deliberately, it avoided opening marriage to them. The hierarchy was clear and enshrined in law. Same-sex relationships were not deserving of marriage. A more clinical civil partnership was more appropriate.

Almost a decade later, in 2013, the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act was passed, acknowledging the rights of same-sex couples to hold a wedding, sign a marriage register and become a husband or a wife in England and Wales. I still so often introduce my wife, or the existence of my wife, to people who then refer to her as my partner, often straight after, in the same conversation. Like a correction. It feels like they have heard the queer bit and defaulted to 'partner'. 'Wife' doesn't quite sound right to them. It is all still very new.

When I made the decision to walk down the aisle, I felt a sense of walking in the footsteps of the people who had gone before me, of my family today and people long dead; of making the same choice; of drawing from the same traditions of our shared cultural inheritance. However, I was also aware of the lack of blueprint for weddings like mine, for marriages like mine. Of treading new ground and of forging

new footsteps that more people might trace behind me.

Navigating the journey to marriage in this new territory was tricky. Waiting for the inevitable moment of misunderstanding in florists, venues and dress shops. *She*. 'My fiancée is a woman.' Being asked which one is the bride. Who gets the engagement ring? Who is being given away? Without a groom, who gives the speech? We were moving in and out of tradition and dealing with clichés and other people's assumptions. It was challenging – but liberating.

Marrying a woman allowed my wife and I to shake off some of the patriarchal expectations of marriage – though we still felt them. In the UK, marriage customs take many forms, drawing from a diverse range of traditions, but it is not difficult to find reminders of women's historic place in today's engagements, weddings and marriages.

We are continually seduced by nostalgia for the past. In marriage, particularly in the celebration of our relationships, we cannot resist looking backwards in the decision-making for our futures – to the proposals in classic novels, our grandparents' twentieth-century choices or Disney-influenced childhood fantasies.

Women continue to take a passive role in wedding ceremonies. The marriage register, the legal footprint of our relationships, recorded the 'father's profession' at every wedding until 2021, with no space for 'mother's'. In churches across the country, vicars, priests and deacons continue to ask, 'Who gives this woman to be married to this man?' Men, presumably, remain qualified to give themselves.

People choosing to marry today continue to navigate a problematic inheritance. In the UK, and around the world, people are forced into the institution without their consent. The unequal distribution of domestic labour within marriage contributes to entrenched economic inequalities. Women's sexual and reproductive freedoms continue to be defined by their marital status and intimate partner violence remains the reality of married life for far too many. We continue to struggle to

define and refine what it means to be seen as a wife or a husband in the twenty-first century.

My motivations to marry were not without tensions and contradictions. I love community and shared experience. And ceremony. I love seeing and experiencing history and heritage in my contemporary life. And I'm a feminist, in a relationship with a woman. Resistant to the idea of doing things just because that is how things have always been done. Conscious that that is how inequalities perpetuate. So, what compels us to keep making this choice? Can we hold true to inclusive and feminist values and take the leap? And what does that even look like? How can we build on the past to redefine marriage for the future? This book explores these questions.

INTRODUCTION

Because I am female, I am expected to aspire to marriage. I am expected to make my life choices always keeping in mind that marriage is the most important.[1]

– CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE,
WE SHOULD ALL BE FEMINISTS

The institution of marriage has enshrined the social, economic and political inequalities of the sexes into law for millennia. From the English monarch Elizabeth I to suffragist and socialist Sylvia Pankhurst, many women have chosen to reject the inherited expectations, assumptions and baggage that would define them as a wife. In European tradition, marriage has long oppressed people who expressed gender diversity and same-sex desire. The institution has seen barriers to the inclusion of people based on race, religion, disability and class. Yet, around the world, marriage remains one of the structures most consistently present across diverse societies. Throughout its long history, people have entered this very personal, political and ubiquitous institution on an enormous scale. We continue to do so today.

This book provides an intimate history. Centring my own journey to marriage as a bisexual, feminist woman from a working-class background in the UK, I explore the traditions, laws and customs that defined the choices of people who lived on these islands before me. I recognize the

reach of these powers across centuries of colonial practices.

In this feminist examination, it is clear there is not one shared understanding of the history of marriage. Feminists have never come together and created a consensus on this age-old celebrated institution that has restricted the lives of so many women around the world. In 2020, Caitlin Moran wrote,

> *From my 45-year-old Witch Throne, where I have seen feminism ebb, flow and ebb again, I feel I should croakingly remind everyone, once more, about the most crucial, brilliant, sometimes frustrating thing about feminism: it's really not a science. It has no rules. It's still just an idea, created by millions, over centuries, and it can only survive if the next generation feels able to kick ideas around, ask questions, make mistakes and reinvent the concept over and over.*

Feminism is often misrepresented, maligned and misunderstood. There has been a history of elitism within organized movements; networks promoting white feminism and trans-exclusionary feminism continue to exclude people of colour and trans sisters. But, at its heart, feminism is about questioning, about looking again. And again. Challenging the assumptions, defaults and expectations we have grown up with. Unpicking the partial versions of the past that we have inherited and imagining new and fairer futures.

This book looks again at the assumptions that we inherit and the expectations we face as we decide to commit to a partner. I have centred the stories of women and those who challenged gendered norms. Women's lives and the lives of nonbinary people remain disproportionately hidden in our understanding of history. Some were actively persecuted, their experiences concealed and repressed. Most went unrecorded. Hillary Clinton descried that women do not get written out of history, 'they never get written in it'.[2] Voices of women and

girls have been continually overlooked. For generations most women were illiterate. Within the UK, once married, many lost their legal status and so appear relatively rarely in official archives. However, through the customs, laws and traditions that shaped and restricted women's lives, we can see a clearer picture of the lived experiences of this under-represented majority. We can better understand what it meant to be defined as a woman or a wife. We can glimpse the realities of choosing marriage – and the risks of not.

As a curator of social histories, I have drawn together a collection of stories, moments in time and cultural traditions to create a whistle-stop tour of 500 years of modern marriage, within the United Kingdom and beyond. I have explored the lives of historic figures alongside fictional characters; well-known women alongside the marginalized and overlooked. In unpicking some of the cultural and social influences that shape our understanding of marriage today, I have aimed to highlight stories that might inspire us to think differently.

Marriage has never been static. We continue to look again, to question our inheritance and imagine new alternatives and fairer futures. For centuries, generations of women and people who expressed gender diversity were forced to defend themselves from injustices and deep inequalities. They fought to shape the institution of marriage that we have inherited today. This book is a celebration of their efforts, their sacrifices and their successes.

—

Marriages have existed in almost every society known to recorded history. There is something in it that we cannot quite seem to resist, but anthropologists tell us that no consensus, no agreement or one model of marriage has ever existed. There has never been one right way to organize our relationships and the foundations of marriage are not easy to pin down. Some claim that the life-long pairing of a man and a

woman is part of the natural order of things, like the mating of males and females in the animal world. However, the vast majority of species are not organized two by two, as though ready to venture into the Ark. Even primates, our closest relatives, do not organize their societies around pairs. They group around females and their young, sometimes around one adult male and several females, and sometimes several adults. Rarely a couple.[3] And like Roy and Silo, the famous male penguin parents of Tango, in New York's Central Park Zoo, same-sex relationships are common across many species. Marriage has always been more complex than just an irresistible natural urge to pair off across the human race.

Others see the genesis of marriage as a trade-off between the sexes. They believe that the roots of marriage lie in the Stone Age; that women were poor and vulnerable and traded protection for sex, becoming 'hearth-keepers' while the men hunted.[4] Protection was an important element of marriage for millennia, but the nuclear family was not the central structure in early societies. Collective hunting and gathering among bigger groups was needed for survival, and women's foraging often provided the bulk of the food.[5]

This protective theory was often used between the 1950s and 1980s, particularly in the United States, to suggest that it was natural for men to go out to work as 'breadwinners' and for women to stay at home – Stepford cave wives. The Piegan, Blackfoot natives of North America, had a similar protective origin story to understand the roots of marriage – but in reverse. In their tale, the ancient Piegan men were very poor. Unlike the women, they did not know how to make lodges, they did not know how to tan their buffalo hides, they did not know how to cut dried meat and sew their clothes. The hungry and cold men gathered on a hill near to the women's lodges and waited for the women to choose husbands to take in.[6]

However marriage has developed, no consensus has emerged in the definition of the institution. Monogamy is by no means a given. For

thousands of years, marriage was, for many people, an arrangement between a man and multiple women. Most of the world's major religions have embraced polygamy and polyamorous relationships and, from Jacob to King Solomon, men featured in the Torah, Bible and Quran have had anywhere from two to thousands of wives. Around the world, marriages have routinely taken place between a woman and multiple men. Among the Barí people in Venezuela, women took multiple husbands, believing it created greater security for themselves and for their children.[7] In communities in Tibet and India, for example, brothers have married a single wife to keep family lands intact.[8]

The concept of legitimate and illegitimate children, a status defined by marriage rules, has been central to some cultures and entirely alien to others. For millennia, matrilineal societies from North America to Asia have practised that children belong with their mother and their mother's family, inheriting their identity, status and resources through her, regardless of their paternity and any relationship commitment.

In areas of China, right up to the early twentieth century, women could marry a dead man to establish ties between the two families.[9] Couples, like those within the Gururumba people in New Guinea, have embarked on marriage with no expectation of ever cohabiting or working with their spouse.[10] In some small-scale societies, including communities in Sri Lanka, marriage was established by a man and a woman eating a meal alone together or a woman simply cooking for a man.[11]

Many native North American tribes formally acknowledged gender diversity and same-sex desire before European puritans violently repressed such practices. Queer relationships were accepted in pre-colonial Māori cultures. A legacy of European colonialism remains the persecution of queer relationships in some parts of the African continent today, but numerous African communities have practised same-sex marriages for centuries. In West Africa, 'female husbands' have been

routinely recognized as the parent of their wives' children, providing them with their name, status and inheritance if a wife brought children into the marriage, or bore children afterwards.[12] Marriages between women have been recorded in more than thirty African populations.[13] Every populated continent has seen same-sex and queer marriages and relationships practised and celebrated.

In Europe, from the Middle Ages onwards, the Christian Church grew to dominate social structures and develop a monopoly on marriage. When this new set of rules and values were exported through centres of European colonialism, the diversity of history's marriage practices began to be repressed and obscured. Definitions of marriage were consciously rewritten in the emerging 'West'. Many of us grew up being taught that marriage is something between a man and a woman and that it is inevitable, natural and desirable, and that men and women have particular, different roles as husbands and wives. That is just how it has always been. But that is not, as we have seen, what history tells us.

There has never been a consensus as to what it means to be a 'wife'. In the UK, and across the West, many dominant ideas of marriage come from a narrow view of the relatively recent past. A history that has been routinely weaponized against women, used to reinforce gender binaries and perpetuate inequalities, injustices and bad habits.

Nothing about marriage is inevitable, natural or fated. It has not evolved organically. It is entirely constructed, but who constructed it? And why? Why do some practices persist and resonate for so many people today? And how can we redefine this ancient institution for the future? With no such thing as a truly traditional marriage, history gives us licence to shake off customs where they pull us in a direction that we do not want to go. Thus, marriage is, and always has been, what we choose to make of it.