Modernity Stories

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IT goes almost without saying that *Primitive Marriage* is a considerable achievement, long in the making and well worth the wait—but I'll say it anyway. For the deep dive it makes into the emergence of an anthropology of marriage around 1860; for its brilliant revisioning of the marriage plot in both anthropological and fictional registers; and for its ambitious rethinking of key terms in fiction, anthropology, and feminist theory, important terms such as "consent" and "contract," *Primitive Marriage* warrants our close attention. It is a dense read, and I defy anyone to do it justice in under a thousand words. So instead, I will sketch out what I take to be a central throughline of the book, across its domains; since all summary is analysis, there's bound to be some distortion here, and other readers differently positioned will no doubt see it differently than I do. I also want to gesture in closing toward what I see as some of its stakes in terms of the field, or at least that corner of the field which Psomiades terms the new marriage studies, largely feminist and queer in its bearings.

Primitive Marriage shows how anthropological theorists—particularly but no means exclusively John McLennan—refigured some of the foundational narratives that characterized the social, economic, political, aesthetic, and intellectual domains by sexualizing them.[1] For example, Psomiades argues that in revising the origin story of "the social contract," in which men band together in exiting the state of nature so as to secure property rights, the property they seek to secure, after McLennan (and well before Freud), is sexual property. The violent conflicts of the state of nature are renarrated as sexual violence, with marriage by capture and forcible rape constituting the "before" from which the modern patriarchal present is ostensibly differentiated by relations of consent rather than coercion. Informed by and indebted to the anthropology of marriage, "Novels tell sexualized *economic* modernity stories by charting a movement from women as objects of economic or extra-economic value

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to women as economic agents," as in *The Eustace Diamonds* (1871–73) or the *Phineas* novels. "They tell sexualized *political* modernity stories"—the examples here being *Daniel Deronda* (1876) and *Phoebe, Junior* (1876), published after the Second Reform Act—"by reworking the classic liberal modernity story of the movement from tyranny to consent, from involuntary to voluntary association" (82).

Casting sexual selection as "a rival and double of primitive marriage" (13) and crediting it with effecting "the conceptual separation of sex and reproduction" (158), *Primitive Marriage* goes on to show in its subsequent two chapters how Darwin's sexualizing of the aesthetic also interrogates the problematics of choice, consent, and voluntariness. As exemplified in readings of *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880–81) and *The Heavenly Twins* (1893), the "choice" among suitors exercised by the aesthetically inclined Isabel Archer, on one hand, and the eugenically oriented Evadne Frayling, on the other—both of them bad choices, to be sure—bespeaks the emergence of that gap or separation, albeit in distinctively different ways. As Psomiades writes, "Knowledge—whether aesthetic or scientific—became important to the consent story of realist marriage." But as she goes on to point out, "Knowledge also has a modernity story" (174), and she tells it in her final chapter, in which the stuff of ritual (or representation) and myth (or narrative), aligned with premodern error, emerges as and in romance, in Haggard's *She* (1887) and Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891). While I won't pause to admire the close readings of the novels here—and especially the reading of *Deronda*, my favorite—they are illuminating, persuasive, and, although complex, rendered in a very lucid prose style.

What I do have space for is to note just a few of the many contributions *Primitive Marriage* makes. First and most obviously, it attends to how anthropology makes sex and marriage (the novelist's terrain) objects of study and theorizes them, producing "a new kind of history" (1) by "[taking] sexual relations out of nature and put[ting] them into the realm of things requiring explanation" (10). As Psomiades writes early on, in a crucial formulation for teachers and scholars of the period that we would do well to take seriously, "The 1860s mark the emergence not only of the theoretical formations feminist and queer theory combat, but also the tools of that combat" (42). Second, it provides a way of rethinking the novel genre at the end of the nineteenth century that accounts for the declining fortunes of domestic fiction and the emergence of sensation, imperial adventure, and New Woman fiction as not only indices of socio-political-cultural change but also narratives of how change happens in,

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over, and across time—or, as Psomiades wittily puts it, "How you represent sex tells you what time it is" (191). Third, and finally, in its returns not only to the 1860s but to the 1980s, via its incisive yet generous readings of the feminist theorists and critics who shaped my generation's intellectual formation—Carole Pateman and Nancy Armstrong chief amongst them—and in its engagement with current theory, *Primitive Marriage* reframes and resituates sexuality and gender in relation to the progressive and problematic modernity stories that it narrates. Along the way, Psomiades not only illuminates both the Victorian past and the more immediate past of feminist and queer theory; she also gives us some new tools we can use in (and for) the present.

Note

1. See Psomiades, *Primitive Marriage*, 1. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.

Work Cited

Psomiades, Kathy Alexis. *Primitive Marriage: Victorian Anthropology and the Novel*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023.

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