Modernity Stories II

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I'LL sum up Kathy Psomiades's achievement by saying that, now that *Primitive Marriage* is with us, it feels as though it has always been here: soon it will be hard to remember what Victorian studies looked like before her monograph came along. At a little over two hundred pages, *Primitive Marriage* may not be a big book, but it weighs more—it has greater intellectual heft—than some books twice as long. While the relations between Victorian anthropology and literature haven't exactly been neglected, nobody until now has attempted a full-scale reckoning with the new science's crucial, distinctively Victorian, preoccupation: the anthropology of sex—or rather, the conscription of sex as formative force in conjectural histories of modern liberal society. Psomiades considers anthropology's massive impact on the genre most centrally preoccupied with sexuality, courtship, and marriage: the novel. Victorian anthropologists' accounts of human sexuality not as a fixed repertoire of essential identities and dispositions but as a historical system, interacting with other cultural systems (property and economic exchange, political relations of domination and consent, aesthetic judgment), informed an accompanying theoretical turn in novels, as they too modeled these systems' interactions in the orders of character and plot.

I focus here on two aspects of Psomiades's argument. One concerns her compelling account of the foundational works of British cultural anthropology, Henry Maine's *Ancient Law* (1861) and John McLennan's *Primitive Marriage* (1865). The first tells "a modernity story about the movement from status to contract," which connects "patriarchy, family, and inalienable property on the one hand, and gender neutrality, the contractual individual, and transferable property on the other."[1] Maine's book gave scientific sanction to ascendant liberal and feminist critiques of

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the laws governing marriage and women's rights, which cast them as regressive holdovers from a barbarous feudal past. But then *Primitive Marriage* "recivilized patriarchy" by positing a wild state of nature before it: "a chaotic world of unorganized sexual relations in which early humans had no understanding of kinship and thus no incest regulations" (1). McLennan's revision of Maine's modernity story recharacterized patriarchy and private property as positive achievements, historical advances toward modernity rather than archaic remnants.

Psomiades registers the gruesomeness of McLennan's scenarios of primordial sex and violence, dressed up as a conjectural prehistory of the human species: "an elaborate and unsavory fantasy of rape, incest, and sexual riot projected into an imaginary savage past" (2). At the same time, she makes a case for his work's productive, critical potential. The displacement of sex from "the perpetual present of nature" into history may install a "temporal hierarchy" of more and less evolved states, but it also effects "a denaturalization of sexual relations [and of their institutional formations, marriage and the family] that can be put to use against, as well as for, hierarchies of normativity" (3)—making it possible, thus, "to imagine the existence of many different forms of marriage and social organization" (36–37). Here and throughout, Psomiades models a politically as well as ethically alert reading of past cultural formations, including those whose worst aspects have come down to us, which reaches beyond the dismissal of them as bad or mere ideology: "the past ceases to be error overcome, and becomes, in its difference from the present, the sign that difference is possible" (32). This critical, even utopian angle, applicable to other scenarios, offers a historical criticism that is responsible both to the past and to the present. Its opening onto the *difference* of the past—viewed as unfinished, dynamic, potential, and manifold in its bearing on our present—is one of the book's impressive achievements.

My second comment addresses Psomiades's own formal investment in stadial history in *Primitive Marriage*. Her own "modernity story" moves from Maine and McLennan in the 1860s, linking systems of sexual exchange, respectively, to economic systems of commercial exchange and to political systems of domination and consent, through Charles Darwin's aestheticization of sexual selection—or rather, here, his sexualization of aesthetics—in the 1870s, to James Frazer's foundation of culture on ritual and myth (*The Golden Bough*) in the 1890s. The sequence articulates a larger nineteenth-century shift in the liberal politics of consent, or voluntary association, from questions of force to questions of knowledge. Toward the fin-de-siècle, Psomiades argues, anthropology turns reflexively upon its own

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status as a discursive system. Its exponents become preoccupied with "the organization of sex and violence through representation: through the performance of symbolic acts, the making of symbolic objects, and the elaboration of explanatory narratives about these acts and objects" (176). The story of modernity becomes a story of genres, articulated through a long-durational shift from (archaic) myth to (modern) realism via an intermediary (early-modern) mode, romance, which gains theoretical traction as well as popular currency in the period's "romance revival":

> The word "romance" no longer denotes the common features of narratives produced at moments in the historical past, but rather the process whereby a global, prehistoric story [of a sexy fertility goddess and attendant rites of sacrifice] makes itself visible in a specific modern present. Romance becomes a form of mediation between an archaic realm of "mythic" meaning, based in human experience of natural phenomena, and a realist world of contemporary individuals and social structures. (179)

What was cast (in the Hegelian phrase) as a vanishing mediator, in the earlier, historicist romance revival of Walter Scott, becomes an eternally recurring one, pointing toward the "mythical method" of high modernism.

This last stage of Psomiades's modernity story opens onto her own act of critical reflection, which doubles fin-de-siècle anthropology's reflexive turn upon its investments in symbol and representation. Here, *Primitive Marriage* speaks powerfully to the mixed legacy of Victorian conjectural anthropology: from its occlusion by successor disciplines (professional anthropology, dismissing it as prescientific—itself primitive and mythopoetic; Freudian psychoanalysis, subsuming it into its own discursive system) to its fallout in, for example, second-wave feminist critiques of the sexual contract. As Psomiades's book so powerfully demonstrates, Victorian anthropology's core problematic—the vexed entanglement of sex, power, consent, knowledge, and representation—compels us still.

Note

1. Psomiades, *Primitive Marriage*, 11. 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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