Time for Sex

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PRIMITIVE Marriage is a monumental achievement, a book that not only provides a lucid and encyclopedic account of Victorian anthropology but also charts anthropology's complex, tangled interactions with other crucial forms of thought in the nineteenth century, including the novel. In Psomiades's hands, the marriage plot is a way of writing cultural development and imagining political agency, and she constructs a newly compelling narrative that makes women's consent the hinge point of history. As Psomiades writes, "The Victorian anthropological project [used] sex to tell what time it is," for "culture begins, in anthropology's marriage story, when disorganized, violent, random sexual activity begins to become organized, peaceful, regulated sexual activity."[1] Sexuality is thus installed as the origin of history. The type of sexual activity your culture recognizes is how you know where you are on the great progressive scale.

Psomiades makes a convincing case that novels written after the emergence of Victorian anthropology around 1865 are fundamentally different from those written before. Before anthropology, characters might represent different types, like a hard-working, middle-class woman versus a morally corrupt aristocrat. But after anthropology, the novel is systematized, with the forces those characters represent enacting their parts in a preordained logic. Late-Victorian writers from Trollope to Eliot, from James to Hardy, from Haggard to Grand, knew their Victorian anthropology. Anthropological writing enabled these authors to think about a "before"—an artistic, religious, intellectual, scientific, sexual prehistory, a chaotic and violent primitivist state, from which marriage (the right kind of marriage, with consent) lifts one into modernity. In Psomiades's words, "what anthropology does to the novel's historical story of marriage, now and then, is to place it in deep time, theoretical time, and in so doing to give it a new, global purchase and new vastness" (9).

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Victorian anthropologists—especially John McLennan—rewrote the social contract as a sexual contract, changing the state of nature into a state of sexual violence, and the development of order into specifically sexual cooperation (92). (This is a theory for which Psomiades uses the appropriate technical term: "highly wacky" [37].) But if I were to offer a parallel from our fictional corpus in the nineteenth century, it might be Eugene Wrayburn pursuing Lizzie Hexam sexually. *Our Mutual Friend,* published right at that 1865 hinge point, shows the possibility of male sexual tyranny and its association with violence but charts its inevitable transformation into civilized marriage. It's only 1865, so people are still new to this—the guests at Veneering's dinner party are concerned—but the plot is following the anthropological script, if with some anxiety.

Primitive Marriage shows that the shift to the anthropological story requires negotiating a lot of other issues. Post-1865 authors have to figure out how to imagine tyranny, tradition, modernity, nationhood, evolution, myth, murder, taste, and agency. Also, Freud happens. Different novelists tweak the story to try to retain or defend or explore or reject alternatives. It is really a *tour de force* that Psomiades reads this trajectory in multiple fields, from the political to the artistic, and in multiple novels, from Trollope to Hardy, *and* through multiple anthropologists, from Maine to Tylor, realizing this central claim about sex and history while still doing justice separately to every strand, and, for extra measure, doing it wittily. There's lots of sex jokes.[2]

In spite of this richness, the basic idea is starkly simple: there was once a primordial mess of violence, involving tyranny and crime and irrationality, but when people figured out how to pair off nicely, it made progress possible—and when women had a say in that pairing, it signaled a new stage of modernity. This is the theory that Victorians structured their marriage plots around. Never mind how *we* theorize Victorian marriage—the point is how *they* theorized Victorian marriage. *Primitive Marriage* offers a theory of the Victorians that is also a truly Victorian theory.

Let me return to *Our Mutual Friend*, and to a different marriage. Bella Wilfer is initially treated as a piece of property. As she demands of Rokesmith, "Was it not enough that I should have been willed away, like a horse, or a dog, or a bird; but must you too begin to dispose of me in your mind, and speculate in me . . . ? Am I for ever to be made the property of strangers?"[3] This is McLennan's story. But Dickens lets us experience it from the woman's perspective. Bella must come to embrace the role she was destined to have, choosing John Harmon herself, out of her own

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voluntary will. Only through that consent can the novel overcome the patriarchal tyranny of Mr. Harmon to create a new social arrangement.

We can use *Primitive Marriage* to read the movement of *Our Mutual Friend* from a primordial state in which violent men grapple in the dark waters over the ownership of women, to a modernity of settled, voluntary, stable relations, a group of consenting mutual friends, *with* an aviary. If the theory of primitive marriage was a new state for Victorians, *Primitive Marriage* marks a new era for Victorianists, bringing us into critical modernity.

Notes

1. Psomiades, *Primitive Marriage*, 42, 6. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
2. One of my favorite moments is when she refers to Daniel Deronda, whose characterization was influenced by Walter Bagehot, as "a Bagehottie" (120).
3. Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, 371.

Works Cited

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