What’s Love Got to Do with It
A Brief History of Marriage

Stephanie Coontz

It’s remarkable to realize that no one under the age of 30 is old enough to actually remember the fairy-tale wedding of Lady Diana Spencer to Prince Charles back in 1981. Yet almost everyone knows about the disillusion and drama that set in a few years later, when it became clear that they weren’t going to live “happily ever after.” As soon as Diana had the two sons the monarchy needed to serve as “an heir and a spare,” Charles returned to his longtime lover, and Diana, bitterly angry, went on to take a series of lovers of her own. As Diana famously complained to a television interviewer, she hadn’t known at the time of her wedding that there’d be three persons involved in her marriage. Many individuals still identify so much with the disappointed princess that they’ve reacted with fury to the announcement that Prince Charles will finally marry the woman with whom he’s had a 35-year relationship.

But having only three people involved in a marriage would have seemed downright lonely to most people of the past, and for thousands of years it would have seemed strange for anyone to have entered a marriage with such high expectations for personal happiness as Diana and the millions of her admirers had.

George Bernard Shaw once described marriage as an institution that brings two people together under the influence of the most violent, delusive, and transient of passions, and requires them to swear they’ll remain in that abnormal, exhausting condition until death do them part. His commentary poke fun at the unrealistic expectations attached to the cultural ideal that marriage should be based on true love. But for thousands of years, people would not have gotten the joke, because almost no one believed that people should marry for love. When individuals did advocate such a bizarre belief, it was no laughing matter, but a serious threat to social order.

In ancient India, falling in love before marriage was considered a disruptive, antisocial act. In some Chinese dialects, a term for love didn’t traditionally apply to feelings between husband and wife: it was used to describe an illicit, socially disapproved relationship. Both the ancient Greeks and medieval Europeans thought lovesickness was a type of insanity, and that it was almost indecent to love a spouse too ardently. The Greek philosopher Plato did hold love in high regard, because he felt that it led men to behave honorably; however, he was referring not to the love of women, “such as the meaner men feel,” but to the love of a man for another man, which was the Greek ideal for the purest form of love.

Once the Greeks became Christians, they got far less tolerant of same-sex relationships. But for the first thousand years of Christianity, the church didn’t like heterosexual love much better than it liked homosexual love. “It’s better to marry than to burn,” said Paul, but it’s better still to remain single and celibate. Right up until the 16th century, the Christian church taught that married love was only one step above unmarried fornication: The Virgin Mary was the most admired woman; the widow the next. The wife occupied the lowest rung of respectable womanhood.

The hierarchy of good things was different for the aristocracy, but for them, too, the pleasures of marriage were way down on the totem pole. The courtly love poems and songs that have so influenced our own sense of what romance is all about were originally based on the notion that adultery was the purest form of love. In 12th-century France, the author of the first treatise on courtly love wrote that marriage is no excuse for not loving. By this he meant that marriage was no excuse for not loving someone outside the marriage!

In most cultures of the past, it was inconceivable that young people would choose their spouse on the basis of an unpredictable feeling like love. Marriage wasn’t about the happiness of two individuals—it was a political and economic arrangement between two families. For the propertied classes, marriage was a way of consolidating wealth, merging resources, forging political alliances, and even concluding peace treaties.
Marriage was also an economic and political transaction in the lower classes. Farms or businesses could rarely be run by a single person, so prospective partners' skills, resources, tools, and useful in-laws were more important than their attractiveness. For a farmer or artisan, getting married was like picking your most crucial employee, and it was a foolish man indeed who would choose her for her looks, or fire her because he didn't love her anymore.

Certainly, people fell in love in the ancient and medieval world—sometimes even with their own spouse. But marriage was far too vital an economic and political institution to be entered into solely on the basis of something as irrational as love, and too important to be left to the whims of two young people. For thousands of years, the theme song for most courtships and weddings could have been “what's love got to do with it?”

Married love began to get a better reputation with the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century. Protestants argued that the clergy should be allowed, even encouraged, to marry, and that Roman Catholics were wrong to call marriage a necessary evil or a second-best existence to celibacy. Rather, said Luther, marriage was “a glorious estate.”

But Protestants were just as suspicious of ardent love between husband and wife as were Roman Catholics, and they were even more hostile toward young people's right to freely choose their own mate. Protestants insisted that a marriage wasn't valid unless the parents agreed to it, even if the couple had gone through a ceremony and later had children together. Luther argued that parents didn't have the right to force a child into a loveless match, but they were totally justified in forbidding a match, no matter how much the couple loved each other, or in annulling a match for which they hadn't given permission. Both Catholic and Protestant theologians criticized women who used endearing nicknames for their husbands, because such familiarity undermined the lines of authority that ought to govern marriage.

It wasn't until the 18th century that a decisive change began to occur in popular attitudes toward love and marriage, spurred by two seismic social revolutions. First, the spread of wage labor made young people less dependent on their parents to get a start in life. A man didn't have to delay marriage until he inherited land or took over a business from his father. A woman could earn her own dowry. This made it harder for parents to control their children's courting.

Second, the freedoms afforded by the market economy had their parallel in new philosophical ideas. During the 18th-century Enlightenment and the age of revolution, influential thinkers across Europe began to champion individual rights and insist that the pursuit of happiness was a legitimate goal. They advocated marrying for love, rather than for wealth or status.

By the end of the 1700s, personal choice of partners had replaced arranged marriage as a social ideal, and individuals were encouraged to make that choice on the basis of love. For the first time in 5,000 years, marriage came to be seen as a private relationship between two individuals, rather than one link in a larger system of political and economic alliances. The measure of a successful marriage was no longer how big a financial settlement was involved, how many useful in-laws were acquired, or how many children were produced, but how well a family met the emotional needs of its individual members.

But these new ideas, conservatives immediately complained, posed a crisis of social order. If marriage was suddenly to be about love and lifelong intimacy, they worried, what would hold a marriage together if love and intimacy disappeared? And how could household order be maintained if marriages were based on love, rather than power?

Traditionalists had good cause to fret. The 1780s and 1790s saw a crisis over these questions, especially in regions influenced by the radical ideas of the American and French revolutions. In America, New Jersey gave women the vote, and several states enacted measures that made it easier for young people to choose their own partners. Most states began to liberalize divorce laws.

The French revolutionaries went further. They redefined marriage as a freely chosen civil contract, made divorce more accessible than it would be again until 1975, and decriminalized homosexual acts, on the grounds that such penalties violated the principle that the state should respect people's private choices. They mandated that families couldn't favor boys over girls in inheritance. Traditionalists thought the world was coming to an end.

At the end of the 18th century, however, the most radical innovations were rolled back. In France, Napoleon repealed the no-fault divorce laws and struck down equal inheritance for women. In America, New Jersey revoked the right of women to vote, and most states adopted restrictions on women's political activity. At the same time, women lost access to many occupations that had formerly been open to them.

But the ideas fostered by these revolutions had made it impossible to fall back on the old saying that women had to obey their husbands as subjects had to obey the king. So people cast about for a new understanding of the relationship between men and women and the nature of marriage—one that didn't unleash the "chaos" of equality, but didn't insist too much on women's subordination or raise uncomfortable parallels between the right to rebel against political tyrants and women's right to rebel against domestic ones.

The result was a compromise between egalitarian and patriarchal views of marriage. There was a new outrage against forcing women into loveless marriages, reflected in the art and literature of the day. But women, in or out of
marriage, weren’t extended the same rights as men. Instead, women were said to possess such a unique moral worth and such a delicate constitution that they shouldn’t be exposed to the risks that men had to take by participating in business or politics. The exclusion of women from politics, in this new theory, wasn’t an assertion of male privilege, but a mark of deference to women’s talents and needs.

And those needs began to be defined in totally new ways. In the Middle Ages, popular culture had painted women as the lusty sex, more prone to passion and sexual excess than men. Suddenly this was turned on its head. It became accepted wisdom in the 19th century that the “normal” woman lacked any sexual drives at all—an other reason to protect her from too much freedom.

By the early 19th century, idealization of love, marriage, home, hearth, and female purity was the bedrock of popular culture. Poems were written about the “angel in the house” and the sanctity of home, completely overturning an older popular culture that focused on community rather than family celebrations.

When Queen Victoria walked down the aisle wearing white instead of the multicolored costumes of the past, a new “tradition” was instantly invented, and people began to lose the memory of a time when female purity, loving marriage, and domesticity weren’t the most cherished subjects of popular culture. One author summed up the new view by saying that if you had just four letters with which to express all the affection and morality and meaning in life, you would simply spell out H-O-M-E.

In the late 18th century, conservatives had warned that unions based on love and the desire for personal happiness were inherently unstable. If love was the most important reason to marry, how could society condemn people who stayed single rather than enter a loveless marriage? If love disappeared from a marriage, why shouldn’t the couple be allowed to go their separate ways? If men and women were true soul mates, why should they not be equal partners in society?

In the 19th century, the doctrine that men and women had innately different natures and occupied separate spheres of life seemed to sidestep these problems by allowing people to romanticize love and marriage without unleashing the radical demands that had rocked society in the 1790s. The doctrine of separate spheres held back the inherent individualism of the “pursuit of happiness” by making men and women dependent upon each other, insisting that each party was incomplete without marriage. It justified women’s confinement to the home without having to rely on patriarchal assertions about men’s right to rule. Men were protecting women, it was said, not dominating them, by preserving political and economic roles for themselves, and women in return would rescue men from material corruption because of their own pure, sexless natures. For a while, the doctrine of female purity seemed to resolve the problem of how to justify women’s exclusion from political, economic, and sexual rights without returning to the naked patriarchal controls of the past.

But there were two serious problems with the compromise between the radical implications of love and the traditional constraints of marriage. First of all, the idealized home was out of reach for most of the population, and in fact, middle-class women’s domesticity and seclusion depended on the denial of domesticity to the working-class women, men, and children who took over the chores that had formerly taken up the bulk of middle-class wives’ time. In the southern United States, slave holders had no respect for the “sanctity” of marriage, motherhood, or protected childhood when it came to their slaves, and even after emancipation, most African Americans had neither the time nor the resources for wives to be full-time homemakers and children to stay home to be nurtured by their mothers.

In the North, women and children who couldn’t survive on their husbands’ or fathers’ wages worked as domestic servants in other people’s homes and provided cheap factory labor. Without their work, middle-class homemakers would have had scant time to minister to the emotional needs of their husbands and children. In mid-19th-century cities, providing enough water to maintain what advice writers called “a fairly clean” home required a servant to lug the equivalent of 100 bottles of water from the public pump every day.

Even for those who could afford to practice the new ideals of domesticity and gender segregation, there was a problem. The doctrine of difference said that men and women were complementary figures who could be completed only by marriage, but it also drove a wedge between the sexes by emphasizing their differences. Women began to see men as a threat to their pure nature and their more refined friendships. In letters and diaries, women often referred to men as “the grosser sex.” For their part, men found it easier to worship an angel in the abstract than to constantly curb their manners and restrain their own enjoyments to put up with the conventions of ladylike behavior on a daily basis.

If the doctrine of difference inhibited emotional intimacy between men and women, the cult of female purity made physical intimacy even more problematic, creating a huge distinction in men’s minds between good sex and “good” women. Many men couldn’t think about a woman they respected in sexual terms; they often went to prostitutes for sexual release, and frequently passed venereal diseases on to their wives. For many women, marital sex was a source of anxiety, guilt, or disgust, yet Victorian women suffered from an epidemic of ailments that were almost certainly associated with sexual frustration. They flocked to hydrotherapy centers, where strong volleys of water sometimes relieved their symptoms. Physicians regularly massaged women’s
pelvic areas to alleviate “hysteria.” In fact, the mechanical vibrator was invented at the end of the 19th century to relieve physicians of this time-consuming chore!

No wonder there was a revolt against Victorian prudery and the doctrine of separate spheres. The sexual revolution of the early 20th century wasn’t a revolt against marriage—it was an attempt to make marriage more satisfying and to make married love more central to people’s identity. And it succeeded dramatically. In the early 20th century, the age of marriage fell, the proportion of men and women who remained single all their lives fell, and the same-sex bonds and intense extended-family ties that had once coexisted with marital ties were devalued, or even labeled deviant. This was when marriage became the happy ending for every story, and when expectations of emotional and sexual satisfaction in marriage led people to elevate marriage above all other personal and family ties. Marriage became a much more important goal, especially for women, and more people reported themselves happy in marriage, than in the past. But the more that people expected to find love and sexual satisfaction in marriage, the more discontented they became when a marriage proved unsatisfying. Divorce rates tripled during the early 1900s. By the end of the 1920s, hundreds of books and articles worried about The Bankruptcy of Marriage; The Revolt of Women; and The Marriage Crisis and asked, “Is Marriage on the Skids?”

The crisis was put on the back burner during the 1930s and 1940s by the Great Depression and World War II, and in the 1950s, it was almost completely forgotten, as the love-based, male-breadwinner family swept aside all other family forms and values. The reaction against the hardship and turmoil of the ‘30s and ‘40s combined with postwar prosperity and unprecedented government subsidies for male-breadwinner families during the 1950s to create what many people see as the Golden Age of Marriage.

By the 1960s, marriage had become nearly universal in North America and Western Europe, with 95 percent of all persons marrying. And as people married at a younger age, life spans lengthened, and divorce rates fell or held steady, individuals were spending much more of their lives in marriage than ever before or since. By 1959, almost half of all American women were married by age 19, and 70 percent were married by age 24. There were also more full-time housewives in society than ever before or since.

Never before had so many people shared the experience of courting their own mates, getting married when they wanted to, and setting up their own households. And never before had married couples been so independent of community groups and extended family ties. The postwar period was characterized by the overwhelming dominance of the nuclear family, male-breadwinner model of marriage. Any departure from this model—whether late marriage, non-marriage, divorce, single motherhood, or even delayed childbearing—was considered deviant.

A 1957 survey in the United States reported that four out of five people believed that anyone who preferred to remain single was “sick,” “neurotic,” or “immoral.” Even larger majorities agreed that, once married, the husband should be the breadwinner and the wife should stay home. As late as 1961, one survey of young women aged 16 to 21 found that almost all expected to be married by age 22, most wanted to have four children, and they expected to quit work permanently when their first child was born.

But under the surface of that placidity, disillusion and discontent were mounting. For both sexes. Hugh Hefner founded Playboy magazine in 1953 as a voice of revolt against male family responsibilities. He urged men to “enjoy the pleasures the female has to offer without becoming emotionally involved”—or, worse yet, financially responsible: Playboy’s first issue, in April 1953, featured the article “Miss Gold-Digger of 1953,” assailing women who expected husbands to support them.

Housewives had their own discontent. In poll after poll, women who married in the 1950s said that they didn’t want their daughters to have the same life that they’d had. Instead, they wanted their daughters to marry later in life and get more education. The limits that these wives and mothers had experienced in their marriages had led them to encourage behaviors in their children that, in combination with the new economic and political trends of the 1960s and 1970s, overturned prior gender roles and marriage patterns. As African Americans, young people, and women challenged the restrictions they’d faced in social life and the economy brought more women into the workforce on new terms, all the old contradictions of the love-based, male-breadwinner marriage reemerged, and this time they exploded.

It took more than 150 years to establish the love-based, male-breadwinner marriage as the dominant model in North America and Western Europe. It took less than 25 years to dismantle it. In barely two decades, marriage lost its role as “the master event,” which governed young people’s sexual initiation, their assumption of adult roles and work patterns, and their transition into parenthood. People began marrying later. Divorce rates soared. Premarital sex became the norm. Acceptance of gay and lesbian relations increased. The division of labor between husband as breadwinner and wife as homemaker, which sociologists in the 1950s had believed was vital for industrial society, fell apart. And many of the mores that once governed why people marry, what predicts marital satisfaction, who divorces, and how cohabitation affects future marital behavior began to change in fundamental and unexpected ways.

Today researchers chase a moving target as they study the new dynamics and relationships of married life. And all of us struggle to understand and come to terms with these
changes in our own families. It doesn’t help when the mass media and political pundits assure us that if we just tried harder, we could recapture a Golden Age of “traditional” marriage. Such illusions merely burden us with unrealistic nostalgia for what love and marriage “used to be,” feeding our guilt and our fears about family change, instead of showing us the grounds for hope: the fact that many people are now discovering how to sustain commitments and make deeper connections both inside and outside marriage. Our challenge today is to reject romanticized views of the past, which make us feel guilty for not living in a sit-com marriage, and to find ways to help all people—whatever kind of family they live in, whether they’re currently married or not—build healthier relationships and meet their obligations to dependents.

**Stephanie Coontz**, MA, author of *The Way We Never Were*, teaches history and family studies at The Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, and serves as director of research and public education at the Council on Contemporary Families. This article is adapted from her latest book, *Marriage, A History: From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage*, published by Viking Press. Contact coontz@msn.com.

---