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How did ideas about 'love' and marriage change in interwar Britain?

The British interwar period witnessed a shift in notions of 'love' and marriage as a direct result of legislative and religious amendments in the mid-1920s, but it was the influence of those amendments on media and wider leisure which led to the disparity between the middle- and working-classes in their experience of the shift. The 'shift' can be expressed by the rise of the 'companionate marriage' as an ideal as opposed to traditional, Victorian marital practices. A new standard of marital harmony was subsequently promoted through middle-class media. However, equivalent ideas of 'love' and marriage in the working-class were not held to this new standard, as despite shifting gender roles in the period, financial circumstances necessitated a working-class faith in the traditional marital institution. The working-class experienced the shift's impact on courtship practices in spaces such as the dance hall, but traditional notions of marriage prevailed rather than dissipated. It was the middle-class's lack of financial insecurity which permitted public discourse around female autonomy in divorce and marriage, yet even in an ambiguous state of cultural emphasis, the 'companionate marriage' soon took hold as the new standard for middle-class, married couples to strive for. The 'shift's' existence would lead one to believe that the concept of a marital ideal was a thing of the past, but more progressive ideas of marital companionship became the new standard for notions of 'love.' Courtship practices among the younger generations of each class demonstrate the extent to which the marital standard held authority; in the social rules around courtship, there were clearly defined norms and indicators of success, evidencing the shift's alteration and reinforcement of ideal marital conditions. Ultimately, the middle- and working-classes experienced a legitimate interwar shift in notions of 'love' and marriage, but the classes differed in their subsequent courtship practices and remained bound by strict marital standards in the social context of 1920s and 1930s Britain.

The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1923 and the Book of Common Prayer vow amendment in 1925 combined to expand discussion around female autonomy in marriage in the interwar period. Rather than requiring that women married in the Church of England swear to 'serve and obey' their husbands, the Book of Common Prayer introduced an alternative set of vows,

removing the phrase and rendering the vows identical for man and woman.¹ The change introduced a degree of choice in marriage by offering the couple a distinct decision in their marital power dynamic, and considering the fact that marriage was a massive life-cycle event mediated by the Church,² the decision was inherently a public one. The Matrimonial Causes Act of 1923 made infidelity a marital crime for both spouses, broadening female autonomy in the matter of divorce as compared to the previous double-standard where women had to prove domestic abuse in addition to infidelity.³ The permissance of marital dissolution due to what some viewed as ‘fleeting’ infidelities⁴ began to represent a threat to the institution of marriage via public discourse. That this was perceived as a threat is evidenced by the publicity surrounding court cases and marriage vows in the 1920s and 1930s; brides were presented as responsible for their decision in vows, which, in the case of the alternative set, defined them as ‘modern’ or ‘new’ women.⁵ Newspapers reported the vow decision in certain celebrity-status or royal weddings as a cipher for the degree of tradition and ‘Britishness’ of a wedding,⁶ demonstrating that discourse around the decision was public and that opinions had polarized. Despite the historiographical shortcoming in there being no record of exactly how many couples opted for the traditional or alternative vows,⁷ it is obvious that public opinion was based on the bride’s decision to verbally submit to her husband; female autonomy in marriage was granted, but not without consequence. Beyond mere gossip, court cases evidenced the couple’s vow decision as grounds for divorce; in one case, a separation order was granted due to the husband attempting to enforce obedience when his wife had chosen the alternative vow, ensuring that she was not legally obligated to submit to her husband.⁸ Hence, legislative and religious augmentations brought on sentiments of the marital institution’s potential instability in the case of infidelity, yet the distinct conclusion was that an increased female autonomy in vow decision and divorce was a matter of public debate and opinion.

¹ T. W. Jones, ‘Love, Honour and Obey? Romance, Subordination and Marital Subjectivity in Interwar Britain’ in A. Harris and T. W. Jones (eds) *Love and Romance in Britain, 1918-70* (2015), 124.

² *Ibid.*

³ H. Charnock, ‘A Million Little Bonds’: Infidelity, Divorce and the Emotional Worlds of Marriage in British Women’s Magazines of the 1930s’ in *Cultural and Social History*, 14.3 (2017), 365.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ T. W. Jones, ‘Love, Honour and Obey?’ 132.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.

Out of the public marital discourse of the 1920s arose the ideal of the ‘companionate marriage,’ which, in the context of suburbanization and the marriage bar, emphasized the need for compatibility in middle-class domestic married life. The marriage bar became more elevated in the interwar period as a method to combat the increased rates of women working during the First World War; upon marriage, women could be sacked, not only in civil service jobs, but in the medical profession and private businesses.⁹ Further, the growth of real incomes, smaller family units, and home ownership in the interwar period meant that women, upon marriage, were thrown into the domestic setting¹⁰ and socially isolated, save for their spouse, until they began to have children. Domestic developments had also seen the radio, reading, and the gramophone rise in popularity as forms of leisure in the home, compelling recreation to be contained to the suburban setting.¹¹ Husband and wife were condensed into one unit, benefiting from higher living standards and engaging in leisure in the home, yet consequently placing much emphasis on compatibility and intimacy.¹² The ‘companionate marriage’ was thus bred, rising from a middle-class interest in female sexuality as it related to sexual compatibility in marriage.¹³ Married interwar women, bound to the home rather than workplace, were chiefly responsible for striving for and maintaining a compatible marriage. In the religious realm, the pressure for compatibility influenced the Church of England’s official stance on marital sex. Bruley cites Banks in that as late as 1913 the Church maintained that sex even within marriage was a sin if not primarily intended for procreation, but by the 1930s became endorsed by the Church of England as essential to a successful married life.¹⁴ This is attributed to an increased pressure on compatibility in suburbanized home life beginning in the interwar period. Considering the relative growth of women’s autonomy in marriage due to the Matrimonial Causes Act and Book of Common Prayer augmentation, rather than balancing the scales of marital power imbalance, more responsibility was thrust upon the wife to maintain the ‘companionate marriage,’ established as a new ideal out of the context of compatibility indicating marital success.

⁹ S. Bruley, *Women in Britain Since 1900* (1999), 69.

¹⁰ L. A. Hall, *Hidden Anxieties: Male Sexuality, 1900-1950* (1991) “‘Most men act in ignorance’: the marriage manual and changing concepts of marriage,” 76.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 75.

¹² L. A. Hall, ‘Impotent ghosts from no man's land, flappers’ boyfriends, or crypto-patriarchs? Men, sex and social change in 1920s Britain’ in *Social History* 21.1 (1996), 69.

¹³ S. Bruley, *Women in Britain Since 1900*, 60.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

The middle-class contribution to the ‘companionate marriage’ standard was manifested in women’s magazines, which identified married middle-class women as a readership to exploit the controversial discussion around female autonomy. Three magazines, *Woman’s Own*, *Modern Woman*, and *Modern Marriage*, aimed at attracting a middle-aged, middle-class, and married demographic of women by promoting images of young, glamorous brides; this aesthetic of a successful marriage is understood as contributing to an ‘emotional culture,’ flanked by articles in which housework and motherhood were emphasized and romanticized.¹⁵ Importantly, these magazines did not set strict rules in the domestic lifestyle; their engagement with discourse on marital relations and sexuality formed a shifting, mutualistic relationship with readers,¹⁶ dependent on their patronage for the magazines’ success. Discourse focused on infidelity, considering the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1923 and its influence on wider faith in the marital institution. Married female readers, now much more capable of pursuing divorce, led magazines to adopt a ‘conservative modernism’ in discussing marriage and ‘love.’¹⁷ The magazines engaged with recent developments around female authority in marriage, but eschewed divorce as a reasonable response to infidelity, and only permitted it in an understanding that the love revoked by wives for their husbands in divorce was extremely emotionally damaging;¹⁸ divorce was therefore only to be invoked if absolutely necessary. In other words, discourse around the woman’s choice to divorce her husband was progressive in discussing its feasibility, but relied on conservatism in framing divorce as reflective of a ‘failed’ marriage compared to the companionate ideal. Rather than bestowing upon women an unregulated liberty to divorce their husbands, male infidelity was presented as a test of commitment; in the narrative of the unfaithful husband, exploited by women’s magazines, it became the woman’s responsibility to repair her marriage,¹⁹ defining her autonomy around divorce and marriage as burdensome. In middle-class engagement with popular media, the marriage discourse solidified the woman as autonomous in regards to divorce, yet this notion was used in the media to hold women to the standard of the ‘companionate marriage’ and thus promote a wider faith in the marital institution.

As a consequence of the new marital standard thrusting responsibility upon women to maintain compatibility, the middle-class bred novel courtship practices in the younger

¹⁵ H. Charnock, ‘A Million Little Bonds,’ 367.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 369.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 373.

generation. 'Playing hard to get' began as a pattern among middle-class bourgeois girls, based on demonstrating one's lack of necessity in marrying immediately and out of financial impetus.²⁰ Courtship's development as a life-cycle stage grew in popularity with the desires of young women in the interwar period for lives distinctly different from their mothers.²¹ In the context of middle-aged, middle-class women engaging in discourse around marital standards, this pattern stands as reflective of ideas of 'love' and marriage establishing an emphasis on compatibility in courtship among the younger generation. Further, it goes to show that the independence of women within the realms of divorce and marital vows extended to their decision to be courted prior to marriage; middle-class girls experienced romantic autonomy in 'playing hard to get,' yet were able to cater an aura of 'respectability.' Respectability rejected notions of frivolity and irresponsibility, which Giles argues were both interpreted as indicative of a lack of self-control;²² hence, sentiments of self-regulation and control were alive and well in the discourse around courtship, hinting at the retention of traditional values even in the context of progressive legislation. The social path of young middle-class women engaging in courtship followed a trajectory of transcending childish ignorance and graduating to a state of material security through the 'companionate marriage,'²³ which reaffirmed the idea that marriages could manifest as a distinctly successful type of relationship or a corresponding failure. The result of seemingly liberating legislative changes actually enforced a tightening-up of notions of successful marriages, and the middle-class developed courtship practices to encourage the younger generation to strive for the marital standard at increasingly earlier ages.

The working-class manifestation around shifting ideas of 'love' and marriage saw an immense increase in patronage of public leisure spaces conducive to courtship, yet the means by which courtship was pursued were distinct from middle-class methods. The popularity of the dance hall among the working-class evidenced the degree to which this ambiguous 'love' was pursued, as the younger working-class generation kindled public romantic spaces in leisure rather than forming ideas about 'love' and marriage through magazine readership. 'Courtship'

²⁰ J. Giles, "Playing Hard to Get": working class women, sexuality and respectability in Britain, 1918-40' in *Women's History Review* 1.2 (1992), 247.

²¹ C. Langhamer, 'Love and courtship in mid-twentieth-century England' in *The Historical Journal* 50.01 (2007), 179.

²² J. Giles, "'Playing Hard to Get,' 250.

²³ *Ibid.*

itself was a stage experienced by both the middle- and working-classes,²⁴ but the extent to which the working-class patronized public leisure spaces is what cultivated the romantic courtship atmosphere associated with them. The dance hall's social conventions emphasized courtship through the invitation to dance with a partner and the development of novel forms of couple dancing in the interwar years.²⁵ Halls could play as many as 45 individual dances a night,²⁶ enticing patrons to dance with strangers and thus cultivating a space where not only meeting, but dancing in intimate proximity with members of the opposite sex was expected. The working-class's younger generation therefore had a public leisure space for courting, but distinctly, 'respectability' in the space differed from middle-class notions; Giles notes that working-class respectability was a 'complex cluster' of female sexuality, material security, respect for and behavior around authority, along with a certain moral and emotional 'outlook.'²⁷ Clearly, there is a divergence here from the middle-class practice of 'playing hard to get,' as the middle-class girls engaging in it had the liberty to postpone immediate marriage. Working-class girls, in their cluster of respectability being based partially on material security, had an impetus to pursue marriage for its promise of economic stability. Thus, working-class conceptions of 'love' and marriage shifted in the public spaces where romance was encouraged, but the marital institution remained a necessary pillar in the lives of working-class girls as representing stability and security; with this considered, there was not room for discourse on female autonomy around divorce and vow-decisions to take place, financial concerns remaining at the forefront of marital decisions. Working-class courtship hence took on a new public form, yet retained traditional notions of marriage through the cultivation of female 'respectability' based in morality and faith in the institution of marriage as a result of financial necessity.

Among married working-class women, ideas of 'love' and marriage remained traditional as evidenced by the rise of a 'shadow economy,' further indicating the dependence of marriage's shifting social position on one's financial circumstances. Despite changing notions of gender power dynamics due to the Matrimonial Causes Act and the Book of Common Prayer amendment, working-class husbands remained committed to the standard of their position as breadwinners in their families; working-class women, out of financial necessity, would at times

²⁴ C. Langhamer, 'Love and courtship in mid-twentieth-century England,' 196.

²⁵ J. Nott, *Going to the Palais: A social and cultural history of dancing and dance halls in Britain 1918-60* (2015), 184.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 199.

²⁷ J. Giles, 'Playing Hard to Get,' 245.

engage in what Bruley defines as a ‘shadow economy’ where wives worked without their husbands’ knowledge.²⁸ This stands at odds with the rising standard of the ‘companionate marriage’ in the sense that dynamics between husband and wife were expected to emulate more equality and compatibility,²⁹ but the development of the ‘shadow economy’ actually supports the development seen in the middle-class where women had to bear more responsibility as a result of the ‘shift’ in their autonomy in marriage and divorce. The ‘companionate marriage’ insisted on one version of marriage representing success and leaving it to the woman to hone her compatibility with her husband or face a failed marriage ending in divorce; thus, the efforts by working-class women to maintain a traditional form of marriage in the face of financial trouble represents how the ambiguity of ideas of ‘love’ and marriage was only in public discourse where finances were not a concern; in other words, though courtship made progressive strides among the working-class in the patronage of dance halls, shifting notions of marriage comprised a middle-class discourse which set new standards as a response to fears of the marital institution’s instability in the interwar years.

Despite financial stability influencing the means by which the middle- and working-classes pursued courtship and marriage, both classes remained held to an altered, though distinct, standard of ‘love’ and marriage. The ‘companionate marriage’ of the middle-class arose through female sexuality and marital relations being topics of public discourse, and the working-class notions of traditional marriage prevailed despite the younger generation’s engendering of public romantic spaces due to financial pressure. Hence, both classes were bound to a particular ideal of ‘love’ and marriage unique to the interwar period, which emphasized a woman’s duty to her husband through the vessel of female responsibility in the realm of compatibility and infidelity. Though the shift in ‘love’ and marriage had a physical impact on the romantic landscape for both the middle- and working-classes, it ultimately cultivated what was essentially an updated standard for marriage. The shift left both domains subscribers to an ideal form of companionship, defined for the middle-class through an emphasis on female responsibility for attaining such a standard of compatibility, and for the working-class as a distinct linear path to adulthood and economic security. The ‘shift’s’ update to a marital standard reinforced structure out of wider fears that the marital institution would break down as a

²⁸ S. Bruley, *Women in Britain Since 1900* (1999), 75.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

result of legislative and ecclesiastic augmentations. Thus, through media and leisure, one witnesses the 'shift' of ideas of 'love' and marriage among the middle- and working-classes, leaving the two with progressive strides in courtship and female autonomy, but vestigial conservatism in that a British marital standard prevailed in the interwar period.

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