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The Joys and Miseries of Marriage

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The "double life" of the great English novelist George Eliot combines the literary field with the experience of marriage. Her works form the crucible for reflections on love, social norms and freedom.

About: Clare Carlisle, *The Marriage Question. George Eliot's Double Life*, Penguin Books, 2023, 369 p.

Marriage abounds in life and in novels, especially in nineteenth-century British novels. While literary criticism has often dealt with marriage, philosophy has rarely done so (p. xi), according to Clare Carlisle, author of the illustrated book *The Marriage Question*. Marriage raises fundamental philosophical questions about "desire, freedom, selfhood, change, morality, happiness, belief, the mystery of other minds" (p. xii), which have informed religious, social, political and legal history. Nevertheless, it is not toward philosophy that Carlisle turns, but toward George Eliot, British journalist and author of essays, poems, and of an influential novelistic oeuvre written between 1859 and 1876, in which, among other narrative elements, matrimonial misery quickly replaces the illusions of the protagonists that led to these unions. Let us mention, among other novels, *Romola* (1863), *Middlemarch* (1871-1872) or *Daniel Deronda* (1879), in which this "marriage plot" is dominant.

Now, according to Carlisle, George Eliot makes of marriage the main plot, not only of her novels, but also of her own life and even of all life, in which respect one can speak of a philosophy of marriage, which would emerge from the biography as much as from the novels. As the subtitle indicates – George Eliot's "double life" – the study concerns what the author of *Middlemarch* herself called her "double life" (p. 41),

not in the sense of another life that she would have led secretly, but to designate her life as an author and as a woman united to the writer and scientist George Henry Lewes, with whom she lived for twenty-four years outside the legal framework of marriage. She met Lewes in 1853 in London literary circles. Lewes was separated without being divorced and father of three sons. From their stay in Weimar and Berlin in 1854, the couple cohabited and established a routine entirely focused on intellectual creation, which made them an ideal literary couple: writing in the morning, walking in the afternoon, reading aloud from their respective works and from great authors in the evening, when they were not receiving writers, philosophers and musicians. Mary Ann Evans, her birth name, then Marian, called herself Mrs Lewes, before also adopting the pseudonym of George Eliot in 1857, at the time of the publication of *Scenes of Clerical Life*, her first work of fiction, whose three novellas develop in the context of the history of Anglican marriage. The two "Georges" experienced a life "of thorough moral and intellectual sympathy" (George Eliot quoted by Carlisle, p. 125)

Given their illegitimate union, however, the couple is considered immoral by their family and social circle, a judgement which did not prevent George Eliot's tremendous literary success, enriched by her activities as a translator. Eliot indeed also dedicated herself to translating David F. Strauss' *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (1848), Ludwig Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* (1841), and Spinoza's *Ethics* (1677): she worked on this translation during her "elopement" with Lewes in Germany (p. 36), after which Lewes urged her to "try and write a story" (p. 38). Her translation, never published during her lifetime, appeared in 2020 (Princeton University Press), edited and prefaced by Carlisle (see its review by Steven Nadler in *laviedesidées*, September 14, 2020).

Marriage plots

Carlisle's project consists of comparing life and novels. For to the "marriage plots" of the novels thus correspond "Marian's own marriage plots" (p. 80), which Carlisle, following Eliot's biographers, discovers in her journals and correspondence. In these writings, George Eliot commented on her union with Lewes, and reflected on marriage, as she did in her novels.

It is within this interlacing that Carlisle defines what she calls the marriage question, which encompasses all the moral and philosophical questions that marriage

raises for spouses, society and the law (p. xviii). It echoes the "woman question", a term that Victorian feminists of the 1850s and 1860s used to designate the reforms of women's social and political living conditions which needed to be made. Carlisle emphasizes the diffuse character of the "problem", arising from the dominant preoccupation with progress and evolution that dominates the intellectual world of the second half of the Nineteenth century, and the couple's interest in Goethe (Lewes is the author of a biography of Goethe that appeared in 1855): like the plant in Goethe, "'the marriage question' should [...] be thought of as a living, growing thing, frequently branching in new directions, always rooted in and reaching out to a world [...] It cannot be summed up in a sentence or a paragraph, because it stretched through [George Eliot's] whole lifetime" (p. xv), especially of course through her conjugal life with Lewes, which coincides the writing of her oeuvre. Hence, "the problem of marriage" extending over the duration of a lifetime, biography becomes "a medium for philosophical inquiry" (p. xvi).

Two kinds of marriages

The comparison between novels and life around marriage brings out an opposition between the institution of marriage, a source of constraints and possible violence, and the ideal of a true union, which dispenses with the institution, like that of the Eliot-Lewes couple. Lewes' status as a married man prevents the legalization of their union. This impediment leads to the couple's social isolation. If Lewes had divorced, their union could have constituted an example of happy remarriage, such as that of Dorothea who, after her first catastrophic marriage to the pedant Casaubon, marries Ladislau in *Middlemarch*. Among the reasons why Lewes had not divorced, Carlisle invokes the changes in divorce law in 1857, the year when the "Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act" was adopted. It unequally establishes grounds for divorce for women and men. While adultery alone was sufficient for a man to do so, for women, it had to be combined with other faults such as incestuous adultery, bigamy, cruelty, abandonment of the conjugal home, etc. By divorcing, moreover, Lewes would have triggered a scandal around George Eliot and his ex-wife, guilty of adultery according to the terms of this new law. This could have hindered Eliot's rising fame already threatened by the illegitimate union, according to Carlisle (p. 175). Other biographers have invoked as an obstacle the exorbitant cost of a divorce before the 1857 reform (£1,000, today nearly €110,000) (p. 285 n.)

Conversely, the legitimate marriages that appear in Eliot's fiction are often sources of brutality, like that of Janet, the protagonist beaten by her husband in *Janet's Repentance*, the third story of *Scenes of Clerical Life*, which calls into question, like the first two, the ideal of Anglican marriage. Bound to an alcoholic, loveless, and tyrannical husband, Janet drinks alone at home in the evening out of despair and feels ashamed the next day. After her husband has driven her from the conjugal home in her nightgown, she questions the sanctity of marriage (one of the "questions raised by marriage": should she leave her husband or not? How can one break free from a "very strong tie" and "be nothing to each other anymore" after so many years? *Janet's Repentance*, cited in *The Marriage Question*, p. 56). Neither Janet nor her friend, the Reverend Mr. Tryan, from the evangelical movement that advocates for a more personal religion, can decide. It is the writer who intervenes by having the husband die, which makes Janet financially independent and, above all, frees her from a dangerous legal and emotional bond. This amounts, according to Carlisle, to an admission of defeat: an insoluble problem for Janet, marriage raises the question of its dissolution, of divorce. The rest of the story emphasises the contrast between a legal and possibly violent marriage and the unorthodox union between Janet and Mr. Tryan. The latter also dies very quickly after the sketch of their love: "If marriage is a sacrament, a holy bond, then which is the truer marriage – an abusive relationship sanctioned by Church and Law, which drives a wife to despair, or the undefined intimacy that redeems her?" (*Janet's Repentance* quote in *The Marriage Question*, p. 56). The juxtaposition of the legality of marriage and a possibly truer form of union underlies the comparative study of George Eliot's life and work conducted in *The Marriage Question*.

Parallels

According to Carlisle, the convergence between fiction and biography becomes essential in this context: Eliot began writing *Janet's Repentance* in 1857, at the moment when the announcement of her common-law union to her close circle led to their rejection:

> "the pain and shame of being out in the cold, improperly dressed, was Marian's inward experience [...], in depicting a sensitive soul forced into battle with the world, Marian was reliving her injuries from the harsh judgments that assailed her relationship with Lewes" (p. 59).

The parallel allows Carlisle to review Eliot's seven novels and present the circumstances of their writing. In the chapter titled "Philosophy", Carlisle's reading of *Middlemarch* proves particularly convincing and inspiring. She reminds us when Eliot was writing this novel, after mourning one of Lewes's sons, the couple was occupied with reading Hegel through the intermediary of a Hegelian friend from Oxford. According to Carlisle, in *Middlemarch*, Eliot stages the master-slave struggle, as well as negativity as the "imagined otherwise" (p. 254), or possible alternative worlds. Transposed into the domain of marriage, negativity translates into the possibility of remarriage, jealousy and regrets, which structure the characters' trajectories, notably Dorothea facing her "failed" marriage, to return to the central heroine of the work.

Even when the comparison is attenuated, it can sometimes be surprising. This is the case with the one that Carlisle makes between the Eliot-Lewes couple and two characters from *Daniel Deronda*, the writer's last novel, in which the destinies of Gwendolen Harleth, who marries the wealthy Grandcourt for his money in order to save her family from ruin, and Daniel Deronda, who discovers his Jewishness during the course of the narrative, intersect to the point of suggesting a possible union between the two. The latter however never materializes, since Deronda ultimately marries Mirah Lapidoth whom he saved from drowning. Mirah is a singer in upper-class homes and her father extracts the money she earns from this; she risks becoming "a commodity paid for with disdain by fashionable society" (*Daniel Deronda* quoted in *The Marriage Question*, p. 229). Carlisle draws a parallel between the relationship between Lapidoth and his daughter and a dark aspect of the Eliot-Lewes couple: while conceding that "Lapidoth is not a portrait of Lewes", she asserts that "he could be a vessel for deep-held resentments of both sides – a means of expressing them, while keeping them contained (p. 231). This is not, however, to say that Lewes exploited Eliot, even though he acted as her literary agent (p. xiii), encouraged her to write some of her novels, such as, for example, *Romola*, and that, in short, a division of labour was established between Eliot and Lewes, according to which the former wrote and the latter sold this product of art (p. 230).

If the comparison between Lewes and Lapidoth seems obscure, it nonetheless points toward one of the study's guiding threads, that is, everything concerning the material conditions of literary creation and coupledom, in the context of Eliot's financial successes, the proceeds of which she deposits into Lewes's bank account. If George Eliot imagined this scene in *Daniel Deronda*, it is because "England's bestselling novelist could not ignore the fact that people write for money, just as they marry for money. And the success of authorship, like the success of a marriage, is often measured

by financial gain" (p. 229). Carlisle indeed cites several times Eliot's private diary dated December 31st, where she takes stock of the year's moral and financial balance, recording the amount of her annual income in the final pages of the journal that she devotes to her life as an author (what Carlisle calls the "double life"). We see these sums grow as the novels and chapters of the study progress.

The comparison, finally, sows doubt in the reader regarding the ideal image that Eliot gave of her union with Lewes. Did the novelist not indeed force the trait by depicting the perfect intellectual and moral sympathy of the spouses for each other, against the backdrop of uninterrupted improvement of their material conditions due to her successes and the couple's rising reputation, during the 1860s, when they lived in a comfortable dwelling in St John's Wood in London and received notably Emerson and Longfellow, Wagner and Turgenev (p. 164)? Did their couple not make "brutal choices", to preserve literary productivity, particularly regarding Lewes's sons exiled in the colonies, where they died successively (p. 182)? Would Eliot have confessed her disappointments and her compromises, wonders Carlisle (p. xvii)?

Legitimacy and Posterity

George Eliot's conjugal life does not end with Lewes's death, as she marries in 1880, in complete legitimacy this time, John Cross, twenty years her junior, with whom she spends the last eight months of her life. Eliot can now position herself on the other side of the opposition, that of legal marriage, not without some hint of scandal, given the age difference between the spouses, as well as her previous union (p. 262). It is regarding this period, during which George Eliot encourages her legitimate husband to write her biography, that Carlisle insists more directly on the material aspect of marriage, inseparable from the institution (p. 258). Carlisle emphasizes the history of the ties that bind Eliot to Cross, who was part of her admirers from the generation of Lewes's sons (p. 208, p. 259), as well as the romantic way in which the writer speaks of this love, which emerges in her as "something like a miracle-legend" (p. 258), taking up again certain motifs from her union with Lewes. Carlisle detects a touch of interest on Eliot's part. It is not a matter of accusing Eliot of having had unworthy motives in marrying Cross, but rather of showing how the novelist was able to idealize the mixture of ambition, interest, and feelings of any marriage, as she had done for her life with Lewes, in contrast to the unhappy marriages in the novels.

By proposing to deduce a philosophy of marriage from the comparison of George Eliot's life and work, Carlisle blurs the separation between work and author, despite Marcel Proust's now classic warning about the necessary separation of life and work formulated in *Against Sainte-Beuve*, and which continues to be debated today. She shows how this separation was fragile throughout the unconventional and intellectual life of the writer, to the point of making her, drawing on her journals, a writer of autofiction *avant la lettre*, one who was able to give "a new elasticity to the concept of marriage" (p. xix), and to the affective and social environments marriages create.

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