

Modern Marriage and the Lyric Sequence

Jane Hedley

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For Steve:

If ever two were one, then surely we.

If ever man were lov'd by wife, then thee.

—*Anne Bradstreet, "To my Dear and Loving Husband"*

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I began to write about love poem sequences in the 1970s, as a scholar of Renaissance literature: my first book, *Power in Verse*, includes a chapter on English Petrarchism. During the 1980s, situated as I was at Bryn Mawr College, I found a ready welcome for courses on nineteenth and twentieth century women's poetry, and although I continued to teach Renaissance literature, contemporary women poets came to be the primary focus of my research and writing. I made this shift in the first instance with an essay on Adrienne Rich, whose "Twenty-One Love Poems" turn against the Petrarchan tradition of poetic love-making on behalf of what a pair of women lovers might undertake to mean to each other. Fully to engage with the feminist project of Rich's sequence one needs to know the earlier tradition; thus I found myself well positioned to write about Rich not despite but because of having specialized in the Renaissance. Nancy Vickers' work on Petrarch was path-breaking for me, as it has been for many feminist scholars of my generation, and so was *The Currency of Eros*, Ann Rosalind Jones's study of Renaissance love poetry as a social practice that put women and men in dialogue with each other.

Perhaps more than any other subject that engages a poet's imagination, love presents itself as being intimate, personal, and subjective; writing about it makes us vulnerable, requiring disclosure of our most authentic and irresistible feelings. And yet those feelings have been scripted for us by the society at large: the personal is political, although the poet-lover will often be, or seem, unaware of this. Petrarch and his Renaissance avatars took love to be an extra-marital experience, but nineteenth and twentieth century poets re-opened the question of what love and marriage have to

do with each other. Poetic sequences that deal with the lived experience of marriage have had to reckon with “the contradictions of a daily love,” as Eavan Boland puts it in one of her poems. What has kept me interested in this subject for the ten years my book has been in the making is the opportunity it has given me not only to work with some of the best poetry in English, but also to bring different arenas of discourse into contact with each other: poetry is just one of many discursive settings in which marriage is celebrated, interrogated, documented, and idealized.

Throughout this whole time I have had interesting and useful conversations about marriage, poetry and related matters with many friends and colleagues, beginning with Stephen Salkever and my dear friend and former colleague, Sandra Berwind. As the best of husbands, Steve is this book’s dedicatee; as my colleague, he has helped me to make key decisions about the kind of book I wanted it to be. Sandra and I have been friends for going on forty years: my thinking about both poetry and marriage owes much to her wit and wisdom. I’d also like to thank my sister, Barbara Turner-Vesselago and her husband Michael for their love and support, and Emily Salkever Scott for a thirty-year friendship that began when I married her father and has flourished ever since.

Current and former colleagues in the Philadelphia area who read parts of the book and gave me good advice include Kathleen Biddick, Nichole Miller, Kristen Poole, Lauren Shohet, Eric Song, Jamie Taylor, and especially Katherine Rowe, who helped me to think carefully about the scope of the project as a whole. Bryn Mawr College supported me with sabbatical leaves and research funds; I would especially like to thank former president Jane McAuliffe for her encouragement of this project when it was just beginning to take shape. Gail Hemmeter, Karl Kirchwey, Joe Kramer, Bethany Schneider, Kate Thomas, and J. C. Todd have warmly befriended both me and the book at different moments during its gestation; a person couldn’t have better colleagues than they have been. I am grateful to Centre College for the opportunity to deliver the annual Bastian Lecture in 2012, and especially to my friend and former student Helen Emmitt: Helen and her colleagues gave me a golden opportunity to try out some of my ideas about the poetic staging of marital dialogue.

Nick Halpern, one of my favorite critics of contemporary poetry, has taught me a lot about Lowell and Glück, and about how to speak boldly from the page. Willard Spiegelman showed me that it is possible, though not easy, to write for scholars and the general reader, both at the same time. Heather Dubrow has been the most generous and supportive of colleagues

for as long as I have been writing about lyric poetry; her scholarly work on the lyric and on the Renaissance epithalamium has been inspirational as well. At Palgrave Macmillan, Allie Troyanos, Rachel Jakobe, Emily Janakiram and the entire production staff were unstintingly helpful at every stage of the publication process. Heartfelt thanks, also, to Devon Thomas, indexer extraordinaire. I owe a debt of gratitude to two anonymous readers for Palgrave who encouraged me to think of gay marriage as an integral piece of the story this book would tell, and to Jonathan Galassi, not only for permission to quote extensively from “Orient Epithalamion” but also for tactful commentary on my construal of his poem’s agenda.

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