"Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains"; discuss the theme of adultery in the novel, with particular regard to the early twentieth century'

'Contract and Transgression'

Matt Foley
Supervisor: ANR
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'Adulteration' as a word implies a pollution or corruption. 'Adultery', by mixing illicit actions in illicit situations, proffers an attack on the society that would declare it to be as such, exposing its rules as arbitrary rather than absolute and serving to ostracize the necessary bonds that hold humanity together. The adulterer is incompatible with social terminology because of his or her role by definition and even through nonbeing or secrecy becomes an omnipresent threat.

This essay seeks to establish a commentary on 'adultery', its role, its consequence and its 'problems' across a given period of writing. It is not a copious methodology and should not be read as such. Antiquated works are referenced because of their literary influence or because they might still be relevant. One should first seek to institute what one is corrupting before that corruption is described, however:

"A contract of eternal bond of love,
Confirm’d by mutual joinder of your hands,
Attested by the holy close of lips,
Strengthen’d by interchangement of your rings;
And all the ceremony of this compact
Seal’d in my function, by my testimony."  

Here, a priest attests to the ideas and conventions that are fundamental in the societal convergence (it is not a natural precondition) of marriage. There is a sense of the interrelated nature of all the collective acts that are being described: all of them a process of exchange or ratification within a relationship. The priest's role in the transaction is indicative of how the process is conceived to be perpetually binding (perhaps a defiant contradiction against the nature of time and humanity) - which gives a sense of the extent it underscores social structure in the novel. The ideal aim of society during this period, and, indeed, during any period is simply to reciprocate and maintain itself.

Marriage is a principle process in the achievement of this goal. Tanner notes: "For bourgeois society marriage is the all-subsuming, all-organising, all-containing contract."  

Marriage is a method of becoming validated contractually by society. But this does not merely have to concern domestic and societal ramifications. In A Midsummer Night's Dream marriage is metaphysical and 'magical' too. It is the form by which society maintains itself, the topic all 'bourgeois novelists' must engage in some manner. Consequently, if marriage loses its vitality, so does the novel.

Interplay involving the manoeuvre of rings is habitual within Shakespearean works and the role of hands and lips in the above extract from Twelfth Night are symptomatic of the contractual nature of marriage, if we are to 'de-mythologize' it. Hands and lips are, according to Tanner, "two parts of the body that man uses in an attempt to take hold of the world" and by this, he talks of 'mancipation and eating' at one level and of 'construction and articulation' at another. So rings are a paradigm of the contractual and man-made nature of their socially binding function and by extension, that of marriage.

Conversely, the destruction or transgression of marriage establishes a severance whereby previously 'eternal' contract does not hold. Interchange becomes dubious, mutuality fades and ceremony becomes empty- the reverse of everything the priest describes. Here, it must be noted that the destruction of marriage is the ultimate implication of adultery- and the removal of a ring is often a precursor to adulterous acts. A chaos envisaged by Vico (where men "take no cognizance of the

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3 TT, Pg 65.
contracts”), akin to that “infamous promiscuity of things and women”, results- he repeatedly uses this phrase in reference to mankind in its presocial state. Thus, the concept of marriage lies at the very centre of civilized society in the novel and contrastingly, the latent chaos of adultery is always a threat. Marriage is an embodiment of true social humanity, a release from ‘barbaric’ and uncivilized promiscuity. It is a bridge between the anthropoid and the social man, comprehending that in its wake. John Locke positively alludes to this model of thought when outlining the 'social contract':

"In transgressing the Law of Nature, the Offender declares himself to live by another Rule, than that of reason and common Equity, which is that measure God has set to the actions of Men, for their mutual security..." 

Adultery serves to establish a 'threatening anticontract' as far as Locke is concerned. In fact, some novels concerning adultery can even exude signs of a desire for formlessness, a regressive quest for a presocial state of being.

In most modern social anthropology there are theories not dissimilar from Vico’s consideration of said matters. For Vico, basic contracts are the exchange of money, the use of language and marriage. In all probability, Vico institutes the first attempt to ascertain the part played by marriage in modern society supposing that it is a construction of the human mind. So the inherent danger in the failure of marriage becomes apparent from all the related contracts and forms of exchange. Tanner comments that “for Vico religion is the sanction behind marriage” and proceeds to cite: "Hence, if religion is lost among the peoples, they have nothing left to enable them to live in society: no shield of defence, nor means of counsel, nor basis of support, nor even a form by which they may exist in the world at all.” So, by definition, the novel concerning adultery must confront, within its narrative, this question of inter-dependence or exclusivity between marriage and religion.

And it follows that most novels concerning adultery then begin to scrutinize society. Post-Viconian society in particular understands that it is a self-mediating regulator- even if it does not always aspire for this to be the case. It is a type of society where stability is established within history, and satisfying interrelationship is an ideal. The identification of discontinuities can be potently subversive. By confronting problems concerning marriage and adultery, a novel must in turn question the transitory nature of social laws and perhaps even conventions it itself adheres to as an artistic form.

One such question arises, concerning individuality: how free is an agent to contract (synonyms: to narrow, shorten, concentrate) for themselves? In Clarissa, contracts are made in the protagonist’s absence and by her father. They attempt to force Clarissa into a loveless marriage and the ideal relationship envisaged in the mind of a parent sources most of the conflict in the novel. "He turned from me, and in a strong voice, Clarissa Harlowe, said he, know that I will be obeyed."

Richardson, Samuel, Clarissa, 2 vols (London: Messrs Rivington & Osborn, 1740) Vol 1, Letter V.

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6 Vico, Giambattista, Scienza Nuova, (1725), qtd. in TT, pg 60.
7 Locke, John, Second Treatise of Government, 1689, qtd. in TT, pg 1.
8 TT, pg 61.
9 In The End of the Affair, Sarah breaks off the relationship because of religious qualms and in an explicitly Catholic manner that is typical of Greene. [Greene, Graham, The End of the Affair, (London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1951)]
10 (In The End of the Affair, for instance, the speaker often contemplates the act of writing a novel. The very first sentence is: “A story has no beginning or end: arbitrarily one chooses that moment of experience from which to look back or from which to look ahead.”)
11 Richardson, Samuel, Clarissa, 2 vols (London: Messrs Rivington & Osborn, 1740) Vol 1, Letter V.
word) of Clarissa can only manifest in negation and refusal: "... a will of my own has long been
denied me." 12 Locke admits: "Children, I confess are not born in this full state of Equality, though
they are born to it." 13 This shift from 'in' to 'to' acts as a concealing device to the contradiction than
consumes Clarissa for hundreds of letters. Her actions are often constrained by familial pressure,
relinquished only once she is dead- whereby she attains a very questionable freedom indeed, from
the hostile wills (in a written, spoken and physical sense) that surround her: later heroine14 (and
heroes) break insupportable contracts with transgression in a different sense.

But there is a corollary of transgression, articulated by Rosseau: "[in] recovering his natural freedom,
[one] loses that social freedom for which [one] exchanged it." 15 Rosseau, when this was written, had
a perceptible disdain for imagined Christian utopias- which he said would be ruinous because of
their perfection- interesting, considering previous discussion. In the mind of the author, perfection
would result from contracts which embodied 'freedom'. Perhaps this is paradoxical. Perhaps having
two different types of contract- one to oneself and one to others created a divisive question of
obligation. While we should not spend too long examining the curious contradictions of the social
contract, it does give a sense of communal constraint, albeit in an abstract theory.

Rosseau promulgates and inculcates an emphasis which implores a respect for contract rather than
hypothetical utopia. However, the promulgation of an ostensible bar to a potential anarchical
element within society might act instead as a device to promote it, or one of its forms. "Respect is
really nothing but a devious route taken by violence..."16 In other words, contract creates
transgression. One implies the other and they are as reliant as they are antonymic: thus the
implication of adultery in the novel is, to an extent, circular.

If most novels concerning adultery begin to scrutinize society, perhaps as a result of the necessarily
tacit bonds that hold it in place (ironically furthering the already destructive extent of the act they
would presume to describe), then we must examine the facets of the aforementioned dissection and
act in the novel.

The location of the act is a conundrum and recurring theme in the novel. Adulterers dream of an
unattainable territory where they are free from the cyclicity of the reality that they face. All areas of
the world they inhabit ultimately seem hostile. Many novels ponder where this place might be
sought and if it could be found. Of course, if such a place were to exist it could result in bad
multiplication:

"... for if a woman
Fly from one point, from which she makes a husband,
She spreads and mounts then like arithmetic;
One, ten, a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand."

12 Richardson, Samuel, Clarissa, 2 vols (London: Messrs Rivington & Osborn, 1740) Vol 1, Letter VIII.
14 ‘Heroines’ are prioritized deliberately here: women are often the subject of a narrative because of their
importance to society in biological terms- they are needed for procreation. This underlying importance is often
not reflected in social standing.
15 Rosseau, Jean-Jacques, Social Contract, translated and abridged by Judith H. McDowell, (University Park:
Pennsylvania State University Press, 1968), pp 53, 60, 62: accounts for where it is later footnoted and referred
to as RJJ. [Opening quotation is from the opening chapter of the social contract.]
16 RJJ
17 Middleton, Thomas, The Changeling, (1653), qtd. in Tony Tanner, Adultery in the Novel, (Baltimore and
Recently, there is a compulsive and contagious appeal not just for an enactor, but also for a reader. *The End of the Affair* is a novel which focuses on themes of obsession, jealousy and discernments within relationships. Indeed, Bendrix (loosely based on Greene himself) and Sarah grasp that their affair will end as quickly as it began because of overt and irrepressible jealousy. Tanner notes: "... the human mind... can transform nothing, or an absence of evidence, into proofs of the vilest kind." This affects the majority of novels on adultery: it can take very little time for strong emotion to transform into its opposite, the most deferential love can become a ravenous mistrust entirely prepared to believe the worst- especially on the behalf of the offended party involved in the affair. Tanner again remarks: "*Our strongest feelings are not built on sand, but rather their own opposites.*"  

The sometimes maudlin and habitually passionate 'crime' of adultery can hold an attraction in no small part because of its clandestine nature. There is typically an undertone of the inherent and unstable triangularity present in a relationship which starkly contrasts the stable mutuality and duality of marriage. Because it is unbalanced, and socially unapproved, 'passion' outside the realms of marriage and in this context becomes part of an attractive and exciting 'anticontract', perhaps appreciated in a more extrinsic sense than the ostensibly innocent and wanton notion would imply. "*Marriage is but a ceremonial toy: / And if thou lovest me, think no more of it.*" Defiance in this respect makes for good reading (conflict is conducive to narrative) - and repeatedly because of the ignorance of society it walks hand in hand with. In *The House of Mirth*, Lily (who probably understands society well enough to be deliberately ignorant) has many chances to marry a affluent man, but she does not, for whatever reason. She avoids a marriage to an Italian Prince by flirting with his son; she incapacitates her relationship with the stuffy and very prosperous Percy Gryce, and so on. She does not commit adultery but is accused of doing so by Bertha Dorset- her desperate social situation made it the case that this could be a credible assumption. 

It should be understood that the majority of novels concerning adultery rely on a necessary structural tension: that between sympathy for a character and the imperative to uphold the law (of the land and society, if they are not the same). One must empathise, or at least sympathise, to care and if one cares, then watching the law being upheld creates a conflict necessary to make the narrative compelling. 

An 'enactor' might start to be faced with a guilty conscience in these situations (which can only encourage empathy). This is because of underlying and implicit conflict- marriage is intended to act as a harmonious mediation and with adultery, one introduces two irreconcilable patterns together, something which, if nurture has any bearing on conscience, should affect a narrative which takes such considerations into account. There is a latent impossibility in participating in two conflicting 'contracts' that compromise societal structure. A transgressor should understand that: "[he/she] introduces agonizing and irresolvable category- confusion into the individual and thence into society itself."
In *The Age of Innocence*, Archer admits as much, bar the ignorance. He knows he is being attracted to the 'clandestine nature of the affair' but it is decided, with the Countess Olenska, that their love is better off unconsummated: "I can't love you unless I give you up". This results largely out of an acute sense of society, which Wharton describes as "lucidly as if she had loved it..." The requisite to preserve the solidarity of one's social group in the novel serves to draw out the anti-climactic ending and ruthlessly present the flaws in a society which Wharton had so estimably described. Here, the bad multiplicity and confusion of social roles is, if a little inferred, understood.

In a naturally restrained narrative, the manner in which Wharton delicately approaches the topic of sexual activity is not surprising. It repudiates association with any lucid description through negation, in a similar manner to many novels from the same period- for instance and to an extent, *Daisy Miller*. Henry James actually remained a bachelor until his death- and some, like F.W. Dupee have speculated that this arose out of a neurotic fear of sex, which would explain its absence in his novels: "James's invalidism ... was itself the symptom of some fear of or scruple against sexual love on his part." This trend is not universal in the novels that came before this period- in most eighteenth century novels; sexual activity is patent if clearly related to money or status- but 'negation' is more frequent and unquestionably telling when it starts to occur and where it is the case. This cannot all be put down to an assumption that the audience of the time would have been easily shocked by matters relating to sex or nudity. A cutting implication is far more effective than a simple description. What is not said often becomes what is thought. Often, when the act is not described, the setting invariably is: it is almost the case that setting has been displaced into description: and thus the act must be inferred from that point. This relates to what has been said about adultery's sometimes 'contagious appeal'- if the act is mystified then it becomes, illogically, appealing. Abstinence in this sense leads to dissolution in novels from this period: this type of novel must realise its unfeasibility, resulting in reintegration and redefinition where narrative, sexuality and society are concerned.

Legally in European society, adultery was a crime all the way through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was not punished by secular courts, however, and was never publically punished in a court at all in the nineteenth century, moving instead into the unspeakable 'realm'. This resulted from an increasing reluctance, due to changing sensibilities, to describe sexual detail of any kind in public situations. One might suggest this is why adultery became such a central topic to the 'bourgeois novel', even though other crimes, like murder, arguably have more of an impact on property and person. They were never unspeakable. Adultery actually threatens familial and societal bonds rather than ending life altogether. It can also be suggested that the act of transgression is one that is deeply rooted in literature anyway: Western literature as we know it begins with an act of transgression, which leads to the destruction of Troy and the near destruction of the Greeks.

One might argue that society learnt to contain the far-reaching consequences of adultery with the negative ritual of divorce; indeed, it is the principle means to that ends. However, there are comparatively few instances of actual divorces taking place in any of the novels from this period. Conceivably, this stemmed from the reckoning of writers that divorce is only an analgesic to a terminal problem. Sometimes, it is also the case that partners have indulged in marriage without truly believing in it - devaluing the contract (perhaps wrongly) with cynicism.

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24 Wharton, Edith, *The Age of Innocence*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s sons, 1905), see the close of the preface: unspecified 'critic'.
After this period, some noteworthy deviations occur. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (which, notoriously was so 'forward looking' that it was only published in England in 1960, despite being released in Florence in 1924) is rather subjugated by sexual activity. One might consider the adulterous and passionate 'love' to constitute a critique of society at the time: by adopting a familiar Victorian structure but concurrently anticipating the social morality of the late twentieth century, Lawrence puts forward his argument that sex and an appreciation of sex is necessary in the dehumanising and greedy social climate if one is to be truly 'happy'. "Obscenity only comes in when the mind despises and fears the body, and the body hates and resists the mind." Most contemporary relationships, he believed, had come to resemble the relationship between man and machine rather than man and woman. Linguistic profanity is intended to be demonstrative against exceeding intellectualism, a signal that the body is of equal value to the mind. Connie realises she cannot live on either one exclusively, having tended towards the mind in a series of unfulfilling relationships. Lawrence notes that neither sexual nor linguistic profanities are utilized for their own sake. Yet, the inescapable physicality of the novel seems to override what is technically adulterous love and thus its implication in relation to society. Lawrence instead endeavours to 'redefine' in his own manner the very essence of contract and relationships, rather than principally criticising society.

Progressively, novels of contract became novels of contact. Realism distorted into metaphor. Conventions by which authors conceived to know their reader operated well into the nineteenth century but were gradually dissolved in this flurry of metaphor that took no account of previous constraint. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is typical of a novel that abandoned the reality of convention for a perceived higher purpose, one which recognises no constraint. No longer content to simply play out a predictable encounter of 'contract and transgression', in the novel concerning adultery and more generally in the novel, the role of reading changed slightly. Later novels tended to become more radically ambiguous and thus further indebted to subjectivism. It could be argued that the locational uncertainty of a metaphor was always present for writers to use (indeed, *The Wings of the Dove* finishes with a cryptic explanation, typical of Henry James: "*We shall never be again as we were!*") and so we cannot point towards this period objectively: however, that a trend developed is undeniable. Experimentation, with a desire to disorder convention, began with authors like Fielding, Sterne and Thackeray (*Barry Lyndon* possesses one of the first narrators to implicitly question the role of the narrator.)

Perhaps it is now appropriate to talk of the theme of desire generally in the novel concerning adultery. The phenomenon of desire is indispensable to the continuation of man. In *The Wings of the Dove*, James even pits fiscal desire against 'love', or its exploitation through adultery. Desire is inexorably bound in every instance to a sense of incompletion: it naturally becomes a central topic in most novels, and by definition tends to self-perpetuation. Denis de Rougement commented that "to judge by literature, adultery would seem to be one of the most remarkable occupations in both Europe and America." His thesis is that passionate love invariably adopts the form of adultery: his inference from this is that people, perhaps not consciously, are predisposed to hold an unappeasable desire for misfortune, unhappiness and death. Our obsession with literature concerning adultery signifies wantonness for passionate love that breaks the law- a subconscious form of escapism. The very fact that this essay has been written, for whatever motivation, or is being read only supports this thesis. One must account for the tenacity of this aspiration. Passion often contradicts morality or societal inclinations (in *The Age of Innocence*, for example, Archer

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27 In 'A Propos of Lady Chatterley's Lover', contained within the general preface to [Lawrence, D.H., *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, (Florence: Amereon, 1928; first published in Britain in 1960)]
understands his affair is likely to be frowned upon - it also contradicts reason in many instances. Passion often transcends anything obtainable in society. Freud constructs a hypothesis centred on 'obstacle love' to answer this:

"It is easy to show that the value the mind sets on erotic needs instantly sinks as soon as satisfaction becomes readily obtainable. Some obstacle is necessary to swell the tide of libido to its height; and at all periods of history, wherever natural barriers in the way of natural satisfaction have not sufficed, mankind has erected conventional ones in order to enjoy love. In times during which no obstacles to sexual satisfaction existed... love became worthless, life became empty..." 30

In other words, we hold a love for obstruction, which intertwines with the very nature of desire (as Wilden points out, "Desire is lack")31. Monumentous stories of love and passion will always conform to this in some way - was love effortless and uncomplicated in Romeo and Juliet? And in Les Liaisons Dangereuses, the obstacle is immorally and unapologetically utilized as an occupation and the use of the word 'conquest' is, for once, justified: at one point, Valmont declines the proposal that he seduce Cecile because he finds the task too easy. Adultery is more important than simple seduction because of the centrality of marriage. Marriage is a form of obstruction - a "chain": more manifest in the period that is being discussed because of the strength of institutional tension, and progressively hindered by the increasing 'mutual neutralization' that results out of a society in which obstacles have perished. Novels about adultery in the period we are describing often centre on the key pressure of societally constructed obstacles: The House of Mirth and The Age of Innocence are novels that play rigid social expectation against personal desire, for example, as do many of Wharton’s works. Adultery is a method of re-introducing a story or a narrative into happenings that have since become devoid of story or narrative. When society begins to lose interest in the contract of marriage, it loses contact with this sense of intense passion. If this were to occur, the novel of adultery and transgression would also fade, as, indeed, it has.

Matt Foley

Bibliography


