Marriage

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Abstract and Keywords
Marital love is rarely represented by poets, at least in their lyric poetry. Lyric, with its brevity, its intensity, its ellipses, seems ideally suited to a particular type of passionate love typified by novelty, absence, uncertainty. Conjugal love, powerful though it may be, lacks these particular qualities. Yet if the pleasure and even purpose of marriage lies in discovering freedom and self-realization within strictly prescribed limits, then lyric could well be seen as the genre most suited to marital love. This chapter examines the tradition of marriage lyric that has developed, for the most part, in recent centuries, as the ideal of loving, companionate marriage has spread. Taking as its starting point the work of the Victorian poet and theorist Coventry Patmore, whose treatise on poetic meter illustrates the same ideals that mark his poems about marriage, the chapter ranges from Anne Bradstreet to Seamus Heaney and other contemporary poets of marital love.

Keywords: marriage, lyric, conjugal, companionate, limitation, Coventry Patmore
In canto 3 of his comic epic *Don Juan* (1821), Lord Byron asks: “Think you, if Laura had been Petrarch’s wife, | He would have written sonnets all his life?”¹ The couplet suggests two different things, depending on which word is stressed. If the emphasis is placed on “wife,” then the lines imply an inherent contradiction between marriage and love. This reading is supported by the opening of the same stanza, which frames the opposition more explicitly: “There’s doubtless something in domestic doings, | Which forms in fact true love’s antithesis” (3.57–8). These lines might sound merely cynical—Byron himself was unhappily married, and he seems here to be rehearsing a well-worn joke about the miseries of matrimony—but there is a long tradition of serious thought about the potential conflict between love and marriage. The topic forms the subject of one of the central dialogues in book 1 of Andreas Capellanus’ *De Amore* (*On Love* (c.1185)), in which a nobleman and a noblewoman debate “whether love can have a place in marriage.” They appeal for an opinion to Marie, Countess of Champagne, who replies firmly in the negative. Marriage, she explains, contradicts some of love’s most essential features. Love by definition depends on free choice, whereas spouses are constrained by duty. Love is necessarily hopeful, aspiring to another, higher state, whereas those who are married can hope for nothing more than they already have. Above all, “true jealousy cannot be found between [married persons], yet without it true love cannot exist, as...Love himself attests in these words: ‘He who is not jealous cannot love.’”²

Andreas is scarcely the most reliable guide. The exemplary dialogues in *De Amore* are highly stylized and often ludicrous. Not only does the treatise not serve as evidence of actual historical beliefs and practices, (p.155) but its relationship even to contemporary love literature is dubious; it seems as much an ironic parody of the conventions of courtly love as a codification of them. But C. S. Lewis, in his study of medieval love poetry (from which he claims that all subsequent Western conceptions of love derive), finds that Andreas was accurate in this at least: courtly love really was defined in opposition to marriage.³ Denis de Rougemont offers a more expansive claim. Not only have the two forces always been at odds, he asserts, but our current attempt to combine them is potentially disastrous:
Now, passion and marriage are essentially irreconcilable. Their origins and their ends make them mutually exclusive. Their co-existence in our midst constantly raises insoluble problems, and the strife thereby engendered constitutes a persistent danger for every one of our social safeguards.4

Laurence Lerner, in Love and Marriage (1979), disputes de Rougemont’s assertion that the attempted grafting of love onto marriage is a modern idea, noting that the conjunction of the two has at least as long a literary history as their opposition, since comedies and folk tales traditionally conclude with the marriage of lovers. But he nevertheless agrees in detecting a fundamental distinction between marriage and “romantic love.”5 The differences are essentially those listed by the Countess of Champagne. Eros, as we have seen, is based on want, doubt, and separation—both separation between the lovers and separation of the lovers from the rest of the society. Marriage, by contrast, involves possession, obligation, and integration both personal and social.

Yet all of these oppositions assume a very particular definition of love. In an appendix added to later editions of his book, de Rougemont protests against the idea that he had ever claimed “that ‘love’ is incompatible with marriage,” a misconception he calls “ridiculous.”6 The conflict exists between marriage and passion, or what Lerner calls “romantic love,” or what both Andreas and Byron refer to, more vaguely, as “true love.” Married love is not an oxymoron, then, but merely another species of love—still erotic (sexual, exclusive), but different from eros as it is more usually understood. In its foregrounding of a sense of duty, married love bears a closer relation to divine or family love (agape); in its temporal extension and lack of teleology, married love resembles friendship (philia). This distinction has found support in recent decades from scientific research: scans reveal that people involved in long-term love relationships display activity in a different part of their brain than people who have recently fallen in love.7 The love that exists between married partners may be strong, even intense; it simply differs from the type of love that has been the subject of this book so far.
Hence the other possible voicing of Byron’s couplet: “Think you, if Laura had been Petrarch’s wife, | He would have written sonnets all his life?” The incompatibility lies not between marriage and love but between marriage and poetry, especially lyric poetry. Nor is it only poetry: the rhythms of married love seem ill-suited to representation in fiction or in drama as well as in verse. So Byron notes in the middle of the stanza already quoted:

Romances paint at full length people’s wooings,
    But only give a bust of marriages;
For no one cares for matrimonial cooings,
    There’s nothing wrong in a connubial kiss:
Think you, if Laura had been Petrarch’s wife...

*(Don Juan, 3.59–63)*

Read in this context the couplet seems much less cynical. It does not suggest that married love is unnatural (there’s nothing wrong in a connubial kiss), merely that it makes for unexciting reading (because there’s nothing wrong in it).

Søren Kierkegaard makes the same point in his treatise *Either/Or* (1843), a large portion of which is given over to a defense of marriage. Like Byron, Kierkegaard remarks that literary love narratives invariably seem to conclude at the moment of marriage and complains that “such works...end where they ought to begin.” He sets out to correct the misconception that the love of a married couple lacks “aesthetic validity,” arguing to the contrary “that conjugal love...is not only quite as beautiful as first love but far more so, because it contains in its immediacy a unity of more opposites. It is, therefore, not true that marriage is a highly respectable estate but a tiresome one, while love is poetry. No, marriage is properly the poetical thing.” Yet even Kierkegaard admits a distinction: conjugal love itself may be more “poetical” than passionate love, but it is less compatible with actual poetry.

Romantic love can very well be represented in the moment, but conjugal love cannot, because an ideal husband is not one who is such once in his life but one who every day is such....But long-suffering cannot be represented artistically, for the point of it is incommensurable with art; neither can it be poetized, for it requires the long, protracted tedium of time.
It is not difficult to see why novels and plays find married love so difficult to represent: a successful, stable marriage has no clear narrative. For D. A. Miller, narrative (like eros) depends on “insufficiencies, defaults, deferrals”; hence “marriage is a dominant form” of what he terms the “nonnarratable.” And yet, as Kierkegaard implies, the temporality of marriage is in some ways well suited to the novel, with its expansive scope and its attention to the everyday. Married protagonists begin to appear only relatively late in the history of the novel, and even then the great majority are unhappy or adulterous or both; yet, rare though they may be, happily married couples do exist, particularly in serial fiction. Narratives (p. 158) of conjugal love, moreover, long pre-date the novel form.

Homer’s Odyssey, for instance, centers on the mutual devotion of Odysseus and Penelope, although their love is rarely shown directly: the couple is reunited only in the penultimate book. In Ovid’s Metamorphoses, however, the story of Baucis and Philemon, who live together contentedly into old age and even after death, is literally central, appearing at the climax of the middle book of the poem. Most notably of all, the marriage of Adam and Eve, as many critics have remarked, stands at the heart of Milton’s Paradise Lost. Clearly there is no absolute contradiction between marriage and narrative, whether in prose or in verse. But lyric poetry is a different matter.
The previous chapters have suggested the many ways in which lyric—with its brevity, its ellipses, its self-conscious foregrounding of linguistic mediation—is suited to passionate love, with its intensity, its doubts, and its tendency to thrive on the presence of obstacles and intermediaries. But a marriage seems much more difficult to cram into the space of a lyric poem. As Tim Hancock astutely observes, even when lyric poems do approach matrimony, they usually take the form either of epithalamia (wedding songs), which stop just short of marriage, or elegies for a deceased spouse, which begin where marriage ends. But representation of the love between people who are and continue to be married is even rarer in lyric than in narrative genres. When the Irish poet Eavan Boland published a collection of poems celebrating her long marriage to her husband, she called it *Against Love Poetry* (2001). The title poem of the collection makes clear the poet’s sense that, in expressing a long-standing “daily love,” she stands in opposition to the whole tradition of love lyric. The poem begins “We were married in summer, thirty years ago. I have loved you deeply from that moment to this” and concludes “It is to mark (p.159) the contradictions of a daily love that I have written this. Against love poetry.” Tellingly, the poem is written in prose.
And yet not only do poems of conjugal affection exist—including Boland’s, the rest of which are in verse—but the opposite argument could be made: that lyric is in fact the literary genre best suited for representing marital love. Marriage after all, like a love lyric, is the conscious, public affirmation of a private emotional condition. Marriage and lyric are likewise allied in their temporality; the non-linear, non-teleological structure of married love, which thwarts narrative, is nicely adapted to the perpetual present of “lyric time,” just as much as the instantaneity of passion is. Above all there is their shared commitment to form. Both marriage and poetry depend on a willing acceptance of certain traditional constraints, with the understanding that those constraints will paradoxically permit fuller individual growth and expression. If the challenge as well as the joy of marriage lies in the discovery or development of a unique personal sentiment from within socially prescribed limits and conventions, the same can be said of a lyric poem. In that sense, the Petrarchan sonnet, as perhaps the lyric genre most laden with conventional forms and expectations, could be said to be, not marriage’s antithesis, but its natural literary mode. Moreover, poetry’s most prominent formal conventions (meter, rhyme, stanza) tend to be repetitive, and hence particularly fitted to the rituals and routines of what Boland calls “daily love.”
In addition to its public/private nature, its temporality, and its dedication to form, married love presents a host of other characteristics that poets have found apt for expression in lyric form. This chapter explores that association in its consideration of the tradition of conjugal love lyric. Many of these poems, like Boland’s, seek to articulate and celebrate the unique nature of love within marriage. Others rejoice in rediscovering the overlap between marital and passionate love. For although there are some clear distinctions between the two, many of the differences can be attributed simply to marriage’s greater weighting of one side of the erotic binary: *married love* emphasizes the pleasures of recognition and conscious effort over those of novelty and spontaneous impulse. Yet emphasis is not exclusion. Just as poetic devices such as rhyme and meter provide delight not only through their regularity but through their occasional variation, so it is with long-term attachments. Married people do not actually become one flesh or grow so regular in their habits that they lose the ability to surprise one another; and that surprise can be all the more pleasurable for coming in the midst of routine.
Marriage differs from the topics of previous chapters in its greater historical contingency. Habits of kissing and perceptions of animals are also, of course, subject to change over time, but marriage, being a purely social construction, is even more variable. Marriage in Western societies was for many centuries a predominantly practical matter, to which love bore at best a tangential relationship; marriages resulting from love, rather than the reverse, were standard features in literature long before they became at all common in practice. Historians generally trace the growth of the modern practice of companionate marriage, based on the personal choice and mutual affection of the partners, to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when it was fostered in large part by the Protestant (and especially Puritan) emphasis on spousal partnership.\(^\text{18}\) This development necessarily influenced the literary productions of that period—*Paradise Lost*, for instance—although, because literature had already long been accustomed to link love and marriage, the effect was less immediately noticeable than it might otherwise have been.\(^\text{19}\) As Hancock among others has argued, in English-language literature it was not until the mid-nineteenth century that lyrics of conjugal love began to appear in any number, and only in the twentieth century that they became a regular if still not common form of love poetry.\(^\text{20}\)
This chapter therefore considers a relatively restricted corpus of poems, dating from the last few centuries and primarily from the past 150 years. It begins with an archetypal Victorian poem of conjugal love that foregrounds the temporal and formal aspects shared by poetry and marriage. The chapter then surveys a number of poems featuring tropes that are typical of love lyric but that assume a new significance in the context of marriage, including triangulation, defamiliarization, and conscious imperfection. It then focuses on two of the most consistent writers of conjugal lyric of the past hundred years, Robert Frost and Seamus Heaney, before concluding by returning to a Victorian poet, Alfred Tennyson, whose poems seek to capture the rhythms of married love. Because the chapter concerns love within marriage rather than marriage per se, it does not examine the many poems that deal principally with marital dysfunction. It further confines itself, for the sake of consistency, to poems that explicitly indicate that the lovers are actually married, even though legal marriage is obviously not a prerequisite for a committed romantic relationship or for the type of love it entails. But by focusing on this particular set of works, the chapter aims to shed light on the wider subject of the connections between lyric poetry and long-standing love relationships of all sorts.
The Angel in the House (1854–62), the work for which the British poet Coventry Patmore is best known, is one of the great poems of married love. Unfortunately it is now more often referred to than read. The poem tells the story of the courtship and marriage of the narrator, Felix Vaughan, and his beloved, Honoria Churchill. Along the way Patmore offers an ideal image of womanhood, an ideal described at length in the verse and embodied in Honoria: a beautiful, retiring, unthinkingly devoted creature, heavenly in her purity and perfect in her attention to domestic duties. The poem became enormously popular in the late nineteenth century, but already at that period some readers, especially women, objected to the gender ideology it espoused. By the time Virginia Woolf, in a 1931 lecture, asserted that “killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer,” the tide had turned, and the poem’s title has ever since been a byword for a particularly insidious form of patriarchal oppression that operates through exaltation. These objections are well founded: the poem’s disturbing ideas concerning women and gender roles are by no means peculiar to Patmore, who was voicing a widespread Victorian attitude, but they are particularly pointedly expressed. Yet mingled among the lyric effusions on the divinity of Woman is some of the most original and moving poetry of conjugal love in English.
Readers hoping to find a depiction of married life in the poem will be disappointed, since, in the tradition of the classic marriage plot, the wedding comes only at the end. The twelve cantos of book 1 recount the lovers’ courtship, culminating in Felix’s proposal; book 2 then describes their engagement, with the wedding finally taking place in the second-to-last canto. Like Penelope and Ulysses, therefore, Felix and Honoria are fully united only in the twenty-third out of twenty-four cantos. Consequently some critics have protested that *The Angel in the House* does not deserve its reputation as a ground-breaking poem of matrimony. But Patmore introduces several important innovations on the traditional courtship plot. First, the lovers are betrothed to one another, and very happily so, for fully half the poem; and even in book 1 the courtship is surprisingly free of impediments or reversals. Patmore has thus done away with any form of narrative suspense. Felix and Honoria are already married in the Prologue to book 1, so the conclusion is given in advance. And within the story itself Felix waits to propose until the outcome is quite certain: “I grew assured, before I ask’d, | That she’d be mine without reserve,” maintaining only “just enough of dread to thrill | The hope, and make it truly dear.” The narrative, to the extent it is one at all, is almost devoid of outward incident; it merely charts the way that two (p.163) people, contentedly in love nearly from beginning to end, relate to each other in varying ways over time.
Narration, moreover, makes up only half the poem. In each canto the narrative portion is preceded by a number of “Preludes,” lyric poems of different lengths thematically related to the episode that follows. Patricia Ball observes that this double structure (lyric and narrative) reflects the poem’s central binaries: spirit and body, transcendence and banality, passion and attachment—in short, angel and house. But what makes Patmore’s poem so convincingly connubial is the way the two sides of the binary refuse to remain separate. We might expect the passionate lyricism of courtship to be followed by the diurnal minutiae of marriage, but that division is blurred from the start. The lyrics do come first in each canto, but they are written in the mature voice of the married Felix, whereas it is through the eyes of the young Felix, still in the throes of passion, that the course of that passion is narrated in deliberately mundane detail. The Preludes and the narrative episodes are also formally interchangeable, since both are written in the same octosyllabic quatrains, and occasionally they seem indistinguishable. In “The Spirit’s Epochs,” for instance, one of the most celebrated Preludes, the lyric voice seems to waver in the final lines:

Not in the crises of events,
   Of compass’d hopes, or fears fulfill’d,
Or acts of gravest consequence,
   Are life’s delight and depth reveal’d.
The day of days was not the day;
   That went before, or was postponed;
The night Death took our lamp away
   Was not the night on which we groan’d.
I drew my bride, beneath the moon,
   Across my threshold; happy hour!
But, ah, the walk that afternoon
   We saw the water-flags in flower!

(1.8, P3)
These lines sum up the poem’s central lesson—that life’s highlights are inextricable from its most commonplace events—in their form as well as in their explicit message. The passage begins in the impersonal lyric voice typical of the Preludes, then switches suddenly in the final quatrain to what seems to be a personal recollection of Felix’s, like those given in the narrative episodes. Yet this “narrative” conclusion, as always in The Angel in the House, eschews incident. It recalls a specific, momentous action (I drew my bride across my threshold), only to reject it in the final two lines in favor of a verbless memory, whose import can be conveyed to others only through the lyric exclamation “ah.” The constant switching between lyric and narrative modes allows Patmore to convey the mingled nature, intense and diffuse at once, of married love.

A similar oscillation is evident at the very start of the poem, in the opening of the Prologue to book 1:

1

‘Mine is no horse with wings, to gain
   The region of the spheral chime;
‘He does but drag a rumbling wain,
   ‘Cheer’d by the coupled bells of rhyme;
‘And if at Fame’s bewitching note
   ‘My homely Pegasus pricks an ear;
‘The world’s cart-collar hugs his throat,
   ‘And he’s too sage to kick or rear.’

2

Thus ever answer’d Vaughan his Wife,
   Who, more than he, desired his fame;
But, in his heart, his thoughts were rife
   How for her sake to earn a name.
With bays poetic three times crown’d,
   And other college honours won,
He, if he chose, might be renown’d,
   He had but little doubt, she none;
And in a loftier phrase he talk’d
   With her, upon their Wedding-Day,
   (The eighth,) while through the fields they walk’d,
   Their children shouting by the way.

(1, Prol. 1–2)
Most erotic love relationships are based, as we have seen, in
dialogue, but marriage is a matter of more public discourse. It
begins with a formal declaration before witnesses, and it is
traditionally mediated through outward signs and social forms
(rings, name changes). *The Angel in the House* reflects this
aspect of marriage through its persistent heteroglossia, or
incorporation of multiple voices and forms of discourse.28 The
heteroglossia is (p.165) quickly introduced in the shifting
discursive registers of these opening lines. We begin with what
appears to be a direct statement by the poet himself,
metapoetically describing the work we are reading. But the
telltale quotation marks in the first section suggest otherwise,
and the second section makes clear that the words form part
of a fictional narrative and actually belong to Vaughan, who is
speaking aloud to his wife.
The situation grows more complex as section 2 unfolds. First it turns out that Felix’s declaration is not entirely truthful, since his modest disclaimer fails to reflect what is really “in his heart.” The opening speech is then revealed to form part of an ongoing disagreement between husband and wife—not an outright argument but certainly a difference, as she is both more ambitious than he and more confident in his abilities. Most notably of all, the time scheme shifts as the section progresses. The opening speech is not a simple declaration produced on a single occasion, as we might expect, but a repeated formula: “Thus ever answer’d Vaughan.” The section thus begins in an iterative mode appropriate to marriage: the Vaughans are going through the same old conversation one more time. But the time scheme switches again in the final quatrain, when the focus turns to a particular discussion on a specific day, namely “their Wedding-Day”—or rather, as we learn from the following parenthesis, their eighth wedding anniversary. The enjambment that separates “their Wedding-Day” from “(The eighth)” is a master stroke. It allows the day to be, not just (yet) another commemoration of the big event, but a typological re-enactment of it, ontologically equivalent to the original. Just as importantly, it allows two different temporalities, the iterative and the punctual, to coexist on an equal footing: the day, like the conversation, is both typical and particular. The alternation between repetition and singularity, between the imperfect tense (“Thus ever answer’d Vaughan”) and the perfect (“he talk’d...upon their Wedding-Day”), foreshadows the effect of the switching between lyric and narrative modes in the rest of the poem.
The Vaughans’ ideal marital union is thus first presented through uncertainty (he does not tell her what he really feels), difference (they disagree), and temporal complexity. All three elements are erotic, but the last is the most significant, because the most peculiar to marriage. Marriages exist over time, but, because married love is iterative rather than linear or teleological, its course tends not to be described through narration, like other love stories, but recounted through enumeration: We have been married thirty years! We have three beautiful children! (The most celebrated counting poem in English, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “How do I love thee? Let me count the ways” (1850), is spoken on the eve of marriage.29) This tendency toward enumeration aligns marriage with poetry, particularly metrical poetry (poetry “in numbers”), which similarly provides structure primarily through recurrence, rather than development. It is no coincidence, therefore, that Patmore’s other great contribution to English letters, written just after he finished book 2 of The Angel in the House, is a treatise on meter, his “Essay on English Metrical Law” (1857). The central claim of the “Essay” concerns the importance of what Patmore calls “isochronous intervals,” or equal spaces of time separating one metrical accent from the next. The accents themselves, he argues, which critics have always treated as the metrical main event, are comparatively uninteresting, since they all fulfill the same purpose, which is to give regular form to that which would otherwise be indistinguishably continuous:

These are two indispensable conditions of metre,—first, that the sequence of vocal utterance, represented by written verse, shall be divided into equal or proportionate spaces; secondly, that the fact of that division shall be made manifest by an ‘ictus’ or ‘beat,’ actual or mental, which, like a post in a chain railing, shall mark the end of one space, and the commencement of another….Yet, all-important as this time-beater is, I think it demonstrable that, for the most part, it has no material and external existence at all, but has its place in the mind, which craves measure in everything, and, wherever the idea of measure is uncontradicted, delights in marking it with an imaginary ‘beat.’30
A metrical beat, like a wedding anniversary, does not (or need not) constitute an actual outward event. But the mind, which “craves measure,” will supply a marker of division in the absence of any perceptible indication.

Not only meter but all the other regular devices of poetry likewise serve to provide a welcome structure to what might otherwise be formless. In his discussion of rhyme, for instance, Patmore quotes with approval the Renaissance poet and poetic theorist Samuel Daniel:

For bee the verse never so good, never so full, it seems not to satisfie nor breede that delight as when it is met and combined with like sounding (p.167) accents which seems as the jointure without which it hangs loose and cannot subsist, but run wildly on, like a tedious fancie without a close.31

In this light it is only appropriate that Patmore begins his poem about marriage by pointing out the jog-trot regularity of his own rhythms and rhymes. Nor is it merely incidental that the language both of Patmore’s description of his own verse (“the coupled bells of rhyme”) and of the passage he chooses to cite from Daniel (“jointure”) strongly suggests matrimony.32 Patmore is clear on this point: marriage and poetry are linked in their shared tendency to submit passion to the forms of “law.” As he writes in the “Essay”:

The quality of all emotion which is not ignoble is to boast of its allegiance to law. The limits and decencies of ordinary speech will by no means declare high and strong feelings with efficiency. These must have free use of all sorts of figures and latitudes of speech; such latitudes as would at once be perceived by a delicately constituted mind to be lax and vicious, without the shackles of artistic form.33

The shackles of form, he goes on to insist, should not be hidden away but proudly displayed: “metre ought not only to exist as the becoming garment of poetic passion, but, furthermore, it should continually make its existence recognized.”34
As in poetry so in practice: feeling requires formal regulation for its full realization. This need does not apply only to feelings of love; Patmore also uses the analogy of poetry, for instance, to describe how wise people achieve true virtue:

They live by law, not like the fool,  
But like the bard, who freely sings  
In strictest bonds of rhyme and rule,  
And finds in them, not bonds, but wings.

(1.10, P1)

But the need to “live by law...like the bard” applies especially to lovers. The urge is exemplified on the occasion when Felix and Honoria first communicate their mutual love. The moment comes unexpectedly, during a family outing with her sisters; as Felix remarks, “The moods of love are like the wind, | And none knows whence or why they rise” (1.8.2). But though it rises spontaneously, the feeling crystallizes in a moment of conscious formality:

And, as we talk’d, my spirit quaff’d  
The sparkling winds; the candid skies  
At our untruthful strangeness laugh’d;  
I kiss’d with mine her smiling eyes;  
And sweet familiarness and awe  
Prevail’d that hour on either part,  
And in the eternal light I saw  
That she was mine; though yet my heart  
Could not conceive, nor would confess  
Such contentation; and there grew  
More form and more fair stateliness  
Than heretofore between us two.

(1.8.5)

“More form” and “stateliness” is not what one would expect from lovers who have finally overcome their “untruthful strangeness” and achieved an unspoken understanding. But Patmore emphasizes throughout his poem how love craves form as much as freedom, “awe” as much as “sweet familiarity.” This combination is captured in the versification of this passage, particularly the multiple enjambments at the end, which cutting across the tetrameters and half hiding the rhymes give the closing lines an easy colloquial flow, yet depend on the unwavering underlying form for their effect.
One of the moments of greatest psychological insight in *The Angel in the House* comes in the final section of the last canto of book 1, when Felix, having just proposed to Honoria and been accepted, feels an unexpected wave of dismay, “As if success itself had fail’d” (1.12.5). In part the reaction is due to a sense of anticlimax, when he realizes that the woman he has so long idealized (“The mistress of my reverend thought”) has now by accepting him agreed to become merely level with him. (The canto is titled “The Abdication.”) But there is also another, greater reason for his distress:

The whole world’s wealthiest and its best,
So fiercely sought, appear’d, when found,
Poor in its need to be possess’d,
Poor from its very want of bound.

At first the final line of this quatrain might seem like a repetition of the line above—the promised good is poor in its “want” or need to be “bound.” But the actual meaning is more subtle: Felix’s joy is tempered by its very boundlessness. Now that their courtship story has reached its conclusion, his love has no clear form to which to affix itself. Book 2 quickly fills this gap, both in its twelve cantos describing the various preparations and rituals the couple must go through, culminating in their wedding, but also, more immediately, in its Prologue, which follows directly after “The Abdication.” Like the Prologue to book 1, the second Prologue shows the couple in wedded harmony, once again surrounded by their children, again counting their anniversaries (“Ten years to-day has she been his”), and again celebrating the iterative rhythms of married life:

And whilst the cushat, mocking, coo’d,
They blest the days they had been wed,
At cost of those in which he woo’d,
Till everything was three times said.

(2, Prol. 1)

Everything is reiterated. Even the “three times said” is itself a repetition, echoing the “With bays poetic three times crown’d” of the earlier Prologue and picking up on a pattern of threes that runs through the poem and lends it structure. Felix prefers married love to the love experienced during courtship because, in the words of Patmore’s essay on meter, his joy seems “lax” until it can wed itself to “form.”
Not everyone shares Patmore’s belief in the perfect aptitude and alignment of conjugal and poetic forms. Other poets often represent married love specifically through the bending or adaptation of formal structures. The affinity between marriage and lyric, then, lies in the imperfection of the fit, the constant negotiation between private feeling and prescribed form that characterizes both. This is true even of a poem such as “To My Dear and Loving Husband” (1678), by the colonial American poet Anne Bradstreet, which describes what purports to be a frictionless marriage. Here Bradstreet deploys the traditional tropes of passionate love lyric but forcefully repurposes them to fit a poem of conjugal attachment:

If ever two were one, then surely we.
If ever man were loved by wife, then thee;
If ever wife was happy in a man,
Compare with me, ye women, if you can.
I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold
(p.170) Or all the riches that the East doth hold.
My love is such that rivers cannot quench,
Nor ought but love from thee, give recompense.
Thy love is such I can no way repay,
The heavens reward thee manifold, I pray.
Then while we live, in love let’s so persever
That when we live no more, we may live ever.36

The poem opens with a series of conditionals: four “if”s in the first four lines. “If” is a crucial word in love poetry, conveying as it does both doubt (is it so?) and hope (if only it were so!). Typically, however, the speculation implied by “if” is drawn out at erotic length. In Shakespeare’s sonnets, for instance, “if” will govern the first eight lines, to be answered by “then” only at the turn, more than halfway through.37 In Bradstreet’s poem, by contrast, the classic “if...then” structure of the sonnet is repeatedly compacted into a couplet or even a single line. Doubts are no sooner raised than resolved. The effect is one of perfect certainty and immediate gratification; in this poem, and by implication in this marriage, the answer to every question or need is always already at hand.
The form of the poem reinforces this effect. In length—as well as in meter, syntax, and subject (“Loving”)—it resembles a sonnet. But, in place of the sonnet’s typical alternating or embracing rhymes, “To My Dear and Loving Husband” is composed of couplets, so that each rhyme word finds an immediate response in the adjacent line. The couplets themselves, meanwhile, are all closed: each rhyming pair is grammatically sufficient unto itself. And the poem notably stops short of reaching full sonnet length. In a Shakespearean sonnet these twelve lines would be followed by a couplet that resolved or reframed the whole. But Bradstreet’s poem has no need for such a conclusion, since it is all resolution—couplets all the way through. Consequently, unlike a sonnet, it has no turn dividing it in two; it is as unified as the marriage it describes.

All of which could be very dull, but it isn’t. The poem may be repetitious: the opening lines assert the same proposition three times. But, as is always the case with poetic tropes like rhyme or anaphora (“If ever two...If ever man...If ever wife”), the repetition is varied in each instance; the lines are both consistent and consistently new. Moreover, the various erotic tropes that Bradstreet employs retain their original valence. Although the initial “if”’s turn out to be somewhat misleading, since they express no real doubt, they still provide a sense of imaginative supposition and open-ended possibility. This sense comes out most clearly in lines 3–4: “If ever wife was happy in a man, | Compare with me, ye women, if you can.” Of the four conditional clauses with which the poem begins, “if you can” is the only one that expresses real uncertainty—or rather, expresses certain counterfactuality (“if you can,” but of course you can’t). This use of “if” to suggest not syllogistic surety but radical impossibility reflects back on the previous three instances and reinvigorates them.
The invocation of “ye women” in the same line, meanwhile, represents another standard trope of love lyric. As we have seen repeatedly in earlier chapters, the presence of a third element that triangulates the lovers’ dyad—whether that element is language itself, or the world and its impediments, or a person who serves as a rival or point of comparison—is indispensable to the flow of erotic energy. Hence Anne Carson finds the archetype of all erotic relationships in Sappho’s fragment 31, in which the speaker watches an unknown man sitting and talking to her beloved. In such a situation, Carson writes,

something becomes visible, on the triangular path where volts are moving, that would not be visible without the three-part structure. The difference between what is and what could be is visible. The ideal is projected on a screen of the actual, in a kind of stereoscopy. The man sits like a god, the poet almost dies: two poles of response within the same desiring mind. Triangulation makes both present at once by a shift of distance.\(^{38}\)

Bradstreet’s triangle looks like the opposite of Sappho’s. The speaker already is the godlike figure who sits beside the beloved, laughing; there appears to be nothing separating the lovers. The address to “ye women” therefore seems to establish less a triangle than a simple hierarchy: I (or we) sit where others cannot reach. And yet Bradstreet’s inclusion of the women is more than merely a triumphalist or self-congratulatory gesture. The presence of the women in her imagination permits the erotic stereoscopy, or double vision, that Carson describes: they represent what the speaker could have been, or what she once was—even, conceivably, what she could be again—without her dear and loving husband. The injunction to “Compare,” in other words, is self-directed, a reminder that marriage, though it may (ideally) be a fixed state, is not a given or predestined one, \(^{(p.172)}\) but is entered into by the free choice of the parties and could easily have been otherwise.\(^{39}\) In this lyric about the absoluteness of conjugal love, the elements of uncertainty, speculation, and comparison remain and provide an erotic understructure.
The language of comparison in line 4 is continued in the following couplet—“thy love” is more valuable than “gold” and “riches”—and this in turn leads to the economic imagery that dominates the middle of the poem. Just as Bradstreet’s twelve lines reject the structural imbalance that characterizes the Petrarchan sonnet, so she also abjures the disproportion that typifies Petrarchan love. Here there is no fear of unreciprocated love, or of ardor on one side being answered by coolness on the other; “Thy love” responds to “My love” as on a balance sheet. Even the momentary fear that “I can no way repay” is quickly allayed by the thought of a heavenly “reward” to make up the difference, continuing the imagery of appropriate “recompense” that runs through these lines. The final couplet of the poem then returns to the rhetoric of the beginning, responding to the opening “If” with a conclusive “Then.” The larger “If...Then” structure stretching across the poem complements the more immediate resolutions of the opening two lines, reflecting the dual logic of marriage as an institution that operates on both a diurnal and a lifelong timescale.

The concluding “Then,” in fact, carries a temporal meaning (“at that time”) as well as a logical one (“therefore”), since the lines that follow are all about time (“while,” “when,” “ever”). On the one hand, the final lines seem to introduce the notion of time only to do away with it, since they look forward to a heavenly afterlife when time shall be abolished. On the other hand, the reference to life everlasting offers, through contrast, an important reflection on the temporality of marriage. Marriage may have no narrative, yet unlike the afterlife it necessarily has an endpoint: marriages can last only until death do us part.40 The mention of death in the final line (“when we live no more”) serves as a reminder that even the most (p.173) perfect and enduring marriage, like the one described between the speaker and her husband, is also necessarily fragile and transient. If a story must have a beginning, a middle, and an end, marriage very clearly possesses at least two of those elements. By drawing attention to those two endpoints, through the hints of doubt at the beginning and the reference to dissolution at the end, Bradstreet allies her poem of changeless affection to other more familiar love stories and lyrics.41
The poet Rachel Hadas, writing three centuries after Bradstreet, adopts similar strategies in an autobiographical sequence of poems about her marriage, titled simply “Love” (1992). Consisting of ten poems of equal length, “Love” strongly resembles a sonnet sequence, but as in Bradstreet the sonnet is modified—each poem has eleven lines—to fit the situation. Hadas’s poems differ from Bradstreet’s, though, in dwelling on the often unconscious intimacies of long-married couples, as in the second poem of the sequence:

Used to each other to the point that we no longer look to one another’s gaze to see what that could tell us; mirrorlike it gives us back what we already are. At least the baby’s clear that we are two, not of a kind. Biology doesn’t tell him, only the greener parent principle. You go to him, he calls for Mama; me he asks for Daddy. Even if for us the grass has gone invisible with use he sees it. So we keep each other green.

The first four lines forcefully convey the changelessness associated with married love. In pointed contrast to the long tradition of love poems in which the meeting of lovers’ eyes represents a transformative event (as in The Angel in the House, or the poems of John Donne), here the mutual gaze affects the lovers not at all. Hence the absence of either subject or verb in the opening clause. “We are” is omitted from the beginning of the poem, because it is simply understood as the postulate of their married condition; as line 4 puts it, “we already are.” At the same time, however, the ellipsis also suggests the clipped, familiar speech of intimates—of partners who can finish, or even begin, each other’s sentences—and this effect counterbalances the rather depressing claim about the utter stasis and predictability of their relationship.
The poem changes direction with the introduction of the baby in line 5 (an unusually early turn that gives this marital “sonnet” inverted proportions, with the first part shorter than the second). Once again, as in Bradstreet, the couple’s love is fruitfully triangulated through a third party. It is not surprising to find a child in a poem about marriage, any more than it is to find the invocation of witnesses in Bradstreet’s poem. But whereas a baby is usually thought to join a couple more closely together, here he very usefully distances them instead, restoring to the couple a perspective on one another that they had lost. As a result of his discriminating gaze, the poem’s pronouns shift. After three sentences full of an undifferentiated “we” and “us,” line 8 refers for the first time to “You” and “me,” each poised at the opposite extremity of the line. When the first-person plural then returns in the next sentence, it is with a new self-consciousness: “Even if for us | the grass has gone invisible with use | he sees it.” The sight rhyme of “us” and “use” reveals what had been invisible to the speaker: that the partners’ “use” or habit (as in the opening “Used to each other”) has a tendency to swallow the couple whole. But the baby—and, in a different way, the act of writing poetry, with its defamiliarization of language and perspective—re-establishes the necessary separation that prevents their close-knit marriage from suffocating and keeps it “green.”

Like Hadas’s “Love,” T. S. Eliot’s “A Dedication to my Wife” (1963) focuses on the extreme intimacy of married love. But Eliot’s poem emphasizes how that love is also necessarily a matter of public record and discourse. This is the basic paradox that characterizes all love poetry (it is private and public, intimate and self-conscious), but it applies a fortiori to marital poetry, in which both sides of the binary are even more pronounced. The full poem reads as follows: (p.175)

A Dedication to my Wife

To whom I owe the leaping delight
That quickens my senses in our wakingtime
And the rhythm that governs the repose of our sleepingtime,

    The breathing in unison

Of lovers whose bodies smell of each other
Who think the same thoughts without need of speech
And babble the same speech without need of meaning.

No peevish winter wind shall chill
No sullen tropic sun shall wither
The roses in the rose-garden which is ours and ours only

But this dedication is for others to read:
These are private words addressed to you in public. 45

The poem begins, like Hadas’s, in mid-sentence, but in this case the opening sentence fragment is attached, significantly, to the title. As Paul Fussell points out, twentieth-century lyrics not infrequently incorporate the title into the body of the poem in this way. 46 But here the gambit is given new life and meaning, since it encapsulates the central tension of the poem. A title is the most public part of a poem: official, detachable, it is the part that faces the world in indexes and tables of contents. The opening sentence of Eliot’s poem, by contrast, celebrates unofficial forms of language, the “babble” of partners who have no need of recognized “meaning”; hence the baby talk of “wakingtime” and “sleepingtime.” Yet that opening sentence depends on the official title to be fully comprehensible, just as the public title is inextricable from the private discourse that follows. The result is a striking mixture of formality (the initial “To whom,” which reads like the beginning of an impersonal letter, especially when followed by the legal language of “owe”) and informality. That dichotomy is summed up in the double meaning of the title: the speaker’s affectionate “dedication” or long-term attachment to his wife can find expression only as “a dedication,” a conscious textual gesture.
The poem is at its most intimate in the second stanza when it mentions smell. In other love poems smell often functions as a metaphor and tends to be associated with flowers, but here it refers frankly to the smell of bodies in constant, familiar contact. (Hadas too describes married intimacy in terms (p. 176) of smell, referring to her and her husband’s “pungent bodies,” “Smelling like [a] pair of German shepherds.”47) Once again, however, the almost disturbingly private description of the lovers is counterbalanced by a decidedly impersonal element. The rhetoric of the stanza is universalizing: the “lovers whose bodies smell of each other” are not actually the speaker and his wife but a generalized, exemplary pair. Accordingly, the third stanza reverts to standard tropes: the smell of bodies gives way to “roses in the rose-garden.” Yet this arch-conventional image is then personalized, as the rose-garden is “ours and ours only” (a claim that is reinforced poetically, since “ours…ours only” echoes “roses…rose-garden” both rhythmically and phonetically). The constant balancing of public and private reaches its climax in the poem’s final two lines, which offer a disclaimer—“this dedication is for others”—while also at last turning to the intimate lyric second person—“to you”—for the first time.
“These are private words addressed to you in public”: Eliot’s self-dissatisfied conclusion could serve as the epigraph to Robert Browning’s great poem of conjugal love, “One Word More” (1855). Like Eliot’s, Browning’s poem is a dedication, addressed to his wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and dedicating to her the volume in which it appears. The explicit topic of “One Word More” is not marriage so much as language; the question Browning grapples with is how, given a medium that is so common and so compromised by overuse, one can express something unique and private and absolute. But the unique thing that the speaker wishes to express, in this case, is his love for his wife. The question of marriage and married love is thus implicit in the question about language: how can the love he feels be made to shine through the daily repetitions of marriage, just as he wishes it to shine through the all too public and habitual forms of language? There is no easy answer, and the poem spends 200 lines considering how to burst the bonds of familiarity. The title itself admits the difficulty of the challenge. The poem cannot be the last word—the ultimate expression of all that he feels—but merely, necessarily, “one word more” in the ongoing flow of discourse, public and private.
Yet Browning turns that difficulty to advantage. He begins by offering a potential solution: to communicate his love fully and truly, he says, a lover must find a fresh medium, a form of expression free (for himself at least) of any association, good or bad. As examples Browning offers Raphael and Dante. Raphael the great painter, according to legend, once in his life wrote a book of sonnets, for the eyes of his beloved alone; likewise Dante on a single occasion, inspired by his love for Beatrice, began to paint a picture of an angel. Raphael’s little book, Browning suggests, outweighs all his paintings—not because it is more accomplished, but because, being unique, it expresses himself more fully: “You and I would rather read that volume,” the speaker suggests to his wife, “Would we not? than wonder at Madonnas.” The same goes for Dante’s angel, a work, if one could see it, of greater interest than “a fresh Inferno” (l. 52). But the catch is that one cannot see it. Both works are missing—Raphael’s lost after his death, Dante’s never completed. “You and I will never read that volume,” the speaker laments; “You and I will never see that picture” (ll. 26, 53). The poem points to models of self-expression that escape the constraints of an overdetermined medium, then takes them away just as quickly.

Browning thus converts the original problem of overfamiliarity into a “problem” (if such it is) of unattainability. Finding a fit language for love becomes an erotic challenge, an elusive goal that the speaker and his wife pursue (“You and I would rather...”) but cannot attain (“You and I will never...”). Later in the poem, when he considers his own attempt to say something new and true and different, Browning returns to the language of lack. Much as he would like to adopt a new art in order to produce one “all-expressive” work, he finds he cannot: “I shall never, in the years remaining, | Paint you pictures, no, nor carve you statues, | Make you music that should all-express me; |...Verse and nothing else have I to give you” (ll. 109–14). In place of Dante’s angel, the best that Browning can offer is verse that insists on its own inexpertise:

Take these lines, look lovingly and nearly,
Lines I write the first time and the last time.
He who works in fresco, steals a hair-brush,
Curbs the liberal hand, subservient proudly,
Cramps his spirit, crowds its all in little,
Makes a strange art of an art familiar

...
He who writes, may write for once as I do.

(ll. 119–28)

Curbed, cramped, crowded: these are the sensations of a novice in the art of composing poetry. (As Browning goes on to explain, the medium of poetry feels unfamiliar in this case because he is “for once” writing in propria persona, rather than through the mouthpiece of a dramatic character; in addition he is using an unprecedented meter, trochaic pentameter, a (p.178) half-step removed from his usual blank verse.) By writing, as it were, with his left hand, Browning feels the pressure of his medium all over again, and so makes his “familiar” art “strange” and novel once more.

“One Word More,” in other words, draws attention to the imperfection inherent in both poetry and marriage. It goes without saying that no marriage is perfect. But, instead of seeing this as an unfortunate failing, as if marriage were an ideal state that any individual human love relationship will necessarily fall short of, Browning reverses the terms. Marriage is like painting or poetry, a flawed medium that will never wholly succeed in expressing the full capacities of human love. Its shortcomings are therefore not to be lamented but celebrated, just as Browning celebrates what his own lyric fails to say. Other poets of conjugal love similarly seek to demonstrate the insufficiencies of form and the accommodations that it makes necessary. Eliot’s poem strains against the arbitrary division between its title and its body. Hadas’s sequence plays against the form of the sonnet, as well as against the iambic pentameter line, which sometimes stays consistent through a whole poem only to give way suddenly—as in the final lines of the last poem, when the speaker and her husband find themselves still “proceeding down the avenue | clutching a clue, love’s puzzle | not yet, not ever done.”49 Married love maintains its power because, like all erotic love, it remains unsatisfied, constantly seeking a more perfect form of expression.
Robert Frost and Seamus Heaney were both prolific poets of marital love. Richard Poirier writes that “Frost is a great poet of marriage, maybe the greatest since Milton, and of the sexuality that goes with it.”^50^ Tim Hancock sees Heaney’s poetry as the culmination of the tradition of marital love lyric that has arisen in English since the mid-nineteenth century, arguing that the poems “inspired by conjugal love” are among Heaney’s best.^51^ Both poets were married for over forty years, and even those poems that are not specifically love lyrics often bear the mark of marital constancy. Of course the story is not quite so simple. Frost’s marriage to Elinor White was often extremely contentious, and many of his greatest poems about marriage are about marital pain and discord. These sometimes include first-person lyrics, such as “The Thatch,” but more commonly take the form of blank-verse dialogues, such as the (p.179) wrenching “Home Burial,” about a couple whose marriage disintegrates after the death of their child. In much of Heaney’s work, meanwhile, marriage is fraught with political overtones. Critics have noted how Heaney frequently uses marriage to figure the uneasy and sometimes forced union between Ireland and England, or between Catholic and Protestant; at an extreme, he presents marriage as a form of ritual sacrifice.^52^
Nevertheless, each poet’s body of work is replete with poems that rejoice in marital attachment. By the time he published his first collection of verse, *A Boy’s Will*, in 1913, Frost had already been married for nearly twenty years, and the sense of rootedness in a relationship is everywhere evident. As Judith Oster writes, “All through *A Boy’s Will*, we sense the two-ness, the ‘we,’...for almost half the poems are either addressed to an implied woman, or somehow include her.”53 Many of Frost’s love poems, both in that volume and throughout his career, provide no internal sign that they are necessarily addressed to a spouse; the other person could technically be any lover. But exquisite lyrics such as “Flower-Gathering,” “Going for Water,” and “Putting in the Seed” all display a common tone, a presumption of shared space, shared memories, and shared language, that would mark them out as marriage poems even in the absence of external evidence. The same is true to perhaps an even greater degree of Heaney, who seems to find reminders of his wife and of the pleasures of marriage everywhere he turns. In “A Postcard from Iceland” (1987), for instance, the speaker dips his hand into a hot spring to test the water, then hears

my guide behind me saying,

“Lukewarm. And I think you’d want to know
That *luk* was an old Icelandic word for hand.”

And you would want to know (but you know already)
How usual that waft and pressure felt
When the inner palm of water found my palm.54

(p.180) Many, perhaps most, of Heaney’s love poems concern the thrill of the “usual,” of recognizing how much is “know[n] already,” in a way that reveals them to be marriage poems even when they are not explicitly marked as such.
Perhaps the best way, however, to get a sense of their conjugal poetry is to look at one poem by each writer that does address marriage explicitly. Frost’s “West-Running Brook” (1928) concerns a young couple who find a stream that, in contrast to all its neighbors, runs west instead of east. The poem takes the form of a dialogue between the husband and wife focusing on the brook, but really they are interested in exploring their newly wedded state, either by discussing it directly or by testing it out through banter. As a result the poem is filled with marital tropes, including a marked fondness for performative speech acts, such as the one that appears in the opening lines:

‘Fred, where is north?’

‘North? North is there, my love.
The brook runs west.’

‘West-running Brook then call it.’

(West-running Brook men call it to this day.)

The poem ends on a similar note, as each partner wishes to name the day after what the other has said, until the wife concludes, “Today will be the day of what we both said” (l. 75). On the one hand, their tendency to name things aligns the speakers with Adam and Eve, in keeping with the poem’s emphasis on origins (which reaches its climax in the husband’s rambling disquisition on the ultimate source of life). More proximately, though, their bent for naming recalls the marriage ceremony, with its performative “I now pronounce.”

That parallel is reinforced by the strangely impersonal parenthesis in the third line. Every pair of lovers shares some sort of private language; it is their way of creating a separate world unto themselves. But married lovers both create a private world and then also ask that it be recognized by the other, public world. Hence the structure of the opening: the first two (p.181) pentameters are each shared between husband and wife, but the wife’s declaration is then followed by an outside, omniscient voice, informing us that “men” have heard and confirmed her words. The sense of triangulation, of having a witness to their union, continues in the wife’s next speech:

“We’ve said we two. Let’s change that to we three.
As you and I are married to each other,
We’ll both be married to the brook. We’ll build
Our bridge across it, and that bridge shall be
Our arm thrown over it asleep beside it.
Look, look, it’s waving to us with a wave
To let us know it hears me."

"Why, my dear,
That wave’s been standing off this jut of shore—"
(The black stream, catching on a sunken rock,
Flung backward on itself in one white wave,
And the white water rode the black forever,
Not gaining but not losing, like a bird
White feathers from the struggle of whose breast
Flecked the dark stream and flecked the darker pool
Below the point, and were at last driven wrinkled
In a white scarf against the far shore alders.)
“That wave’s been standing off this jut of shore
Ever since rivers, I was going to say,
Were made in heaven. It wasn’t waved to us.”
“It wasn’t, yet it was. If not to you
It was to me—in an annunciation.”

(ll. 11–31)

The retrograde wave—a contrariety within a contrariety, since the brook itself flows against the usual direction—provides both the source of the couple’s disagreement and an analogy for it. Their dispute centers on the fundamental marital binary of private and public. The woman describes things in personal terms, using the language of possession, intimacy, and private intuition. Even her desire for triangulation seeks to incorporate the third party (“We’ll both be married to the brook”) rather than treating it as an agent of useful defamiliarization, as in Bradstreet and Hadas. Her husband, by contrast, prefers to speak in categories (“rivers” in general), a tendency that continues in his long subsequent speech, which is not about this particular brook but about “the stream of everything” (l. 44). These habits extend even to their naming of each other: she calls him “Fred,” while he refers to her more categorically as “my love” or “my dear.”
Yet both these positions are presumably an indulgence, made possible by their marriage. As the wife says at the beginning when she first observes the stream running west, “It must be the brook | Can trust itself to go by contraries | The way I can with you—or you with me” (ll. 6–8). The couple’s argument about the wave, in other words, is not only a lovers’ game, a way of keeping things fresh through pleasurable contradiction, like the wave itself, but a luxuriating in union. The wife can go to extremes—can personify the stream as much as she likes, play on the ambiguity of the word “wave,” even cast herself as the recipient of an “annunciation”—because she is aware that her husband will provide the necessary logical counterbalance without her needing to do it for herself. Her whimsy is licensed by her consciousness of his presence and her foreknowledge of what he will say. Of course lovers need not be married to enjoy this sort of conscious complementarity. But such division of labor is more common when the partners are committed and so can “trust” that the other will be there to provide the needed response—just as, in “West-Running Brook,” they are sure to fill up each other’s unfinished pentameters. The wife is right to designate today as “the day of what we both said,” since each partner’s speech (the wife’s self-indulgent fantasy, the husband’s equally self-indulgent lecture on the nature of everything) is incomplete on its own, made possible by the other.
The principal description of the wave itself, however, comes not from either partner but from the third-party parenthetical voice, which here makes its second and final appearance in the poem. Even more than in the first instance, the intrusion provides a disorienting jolt, making the reader conscious of the poem’s role in mediating the conjugal dialogue. The effect derives not just from the use of specifically metapoetic imagery (the “black” and “white” of the wave, which textualizes the natural phenomenon) but from the use of an extended simile. From Homer onward, the long, fully elaborated simile has been the hallmark of poetic writing, setting it apart from other genres. But the use of simile is particularly fitting in this case. If metaphor, as we have said, is one of the central erotic tropes, essential to all love poetry, the subcategory of simile is especially appropriate to marriage poetry. The difference between the two tropes (essentially, the presence of the word “like” or an equivalent) is small but crucial in its effect. Simile is more deliberate than metaphor and more willing to offer concessions. The wife’s metaphor in the passage above (“the bridge shall be | Our arm thrown over it asleep beside it”) gives pleasure through its impulsiveness; like all metaphor it is unabashed in its coupling of images. By contrast the parenthetical simile (“one white wave...like a bird”), by its very use of “like,” admits unlikeness as well; (p. 183) the hitching of the two elements feels more conscious—a private perception of compatibility submitted to public consideration.

The wife’s desire to take a natural phenomenon like the brook as the symbol of marriage is an understandable one, since the image from nature associates marriage with organic form and erotic unpredictability. A similar impulse is visible in Heaney’s great poem of married love, “The Skunk” (1979):

Up, black, striped and damasked like the chasuble
At a funeral mass, the skunk’s tail
Paraded the skunk. Night after night
I expected her like a visitor:

The refrigerator whinnied into silence.
My desk light softened beyond the veranda.
Small oranges loomed in the orange tree.
I began to be tense as a voyeur.

After eleven years I was composing
Love-letters again, broaching the word ‘wife’
Like a stored cask, as if its slender vowel
Had mutated into the night earth and air

Of California. The beautiful, useless
Tang of eucalyptus spelt your absence.
The aftermath of a mouthful of wine
Was like inhaling you off a cold pillow.

And there she was, the intent and glamorous,
Ordinary, mysterious skunk,
Mythologized, demythologized,
Snuffing the boards five feet beyond me.

It all came back to me last night, stirred
By the sootfall of your things at bedtime,
Your head-down, tail-up hunt in a bottom drawer
For the black plunge-line nightdress.  

The magic of Heaney’s poem lies in the way it combines the
“ordinary” and the “mysterious.” To compare your wife to a
skunk is a risky proposition. But the skunk is depicted in terms
that are both familiar or homely (“demythologized,”
“snuffing”) and excitingly exotic; the comparison to his wife
therefore manages to suggest both marital attachment and
romantic passion. As Hancock puts it, Heaney creates “a sort
of poetic double exposure whereby one individual is seen in
the light of two kinds of love, and is thereby—for the space of
the poem at (p. 184) least—transformed into the fusion of
eros and agape that never was.” The result is similar to the
“stereoscopy” that Anne Carson detects in Sappho, a
projection of the ideal onto the actual—only seen, as it were,
through the other side of the lens: the idealizing fantasy is not
prospective, in this case, but retrospective.
Yet the time scheme of “The Skunk” is more than a simple matter of prospect and retrospect, past and present, and much of the poem’s effect derives from its temporal involutions. When the poem begins the speaker is long married. But because he is now at a physical remove from his wife, he finds himself suddenly transported back more than a decade, to a premarital moment of desirous distance. At the same time, however, his current object of intense interest, the skunk, appeals to him specifically for her regularity: she is there dependably “Night after night.” Right away, then, we find a pairing of novelty and routine, although the elements refuse to settle into a neat binary: it is the habitual skunk who keeps the speaker looking forward, “tense” with erotic expectation, while the wife, newly rediscovered through her absence, seems at times to be constantly present, detectable in every daily sensory experience. The temporal complexity reaches its climax in the final stanza, when we jump ahead to the present (“last night”), where the wife, rummaging for a sexy nightdress that she presumably has not worn in some time (hence the need to “hunt” for it), reminds the speaker of the skunk of earlier days, which was itself memorable largely for its association with the absent wife, who after eleven years was once again reminiscent of the girl he had married. Whereas in Patmore the temporality of marriage is suggested through the suspended present tense of lyric time and the isochronous intervals of meter, Heaney’s poem relies instead on temporal layering, to represent the simultaneous action of memory, routine, and expectation—past, present, and future—that characterizes married love.
While “The Skunk” highlights its natural imagery (the exotic eucalyptus and orange trees), it is just as conscious of the role played by artifice, and specifically by language, in sustaining conjugal eros. The skunk herself is presented as a poetic construction: she finally makes her appearance “Snuffing the boards five feet beyond me”—both made present and distanced (“beyond me”) by the poetic line that describes her (“five feet”). (p.185) The poem also sets up a deliberate pattern of similes, placing one at the end of three of the first four stanzas (“like a visitor,” “tense as a voyeur,” “like inhaling you”). But it is the central stanzas that draw the most direct attention to their own status as text. The speaker recognizes himself as a romantic lover once again when he begins writing “Love-letters”—the classic signifier of erotic separation and connection. The meaning of “letters” quickly shifts, however, to refer to an even more basic textual phenomenon, as the speaker contemplates “the word ‘wife’” and the “slender vowel” at its center. “Vowel” turns out to be somewhat misleading, since the wordplay that follows focuses not on “I” but on “if.” The speaker fantasizes that “wife” has “mutated into...California”—the state that he has temporarily exchanged for his state of domesticity—playing on the shared “if” at the center of each. The two words are linked by an actual “if”: “as if its slender vowel | Had mutated...” As in Bradstreet, “if” serves as the great tool of renewal, offering an alternative perspective. The connection between textuality and sexuality is explicit: it is the unfamiliarity of the word “wife” when written down, the novel perception of the “if” at its center and the imaginative possibilities to which that perception leads, that spurs the renewal of erotic interest these stanzas describe. In its superimposition of passion and attachment, its distinctly non-linear temporality, and its conscious fixing of eros to linguistic and especially poetic form, “The Skunk” is Heaney’s most archetypal marital lyric.

The situation in Alfred Tennyson’s “The Daisy” (1855) resembles that of Heaney’s “The Skunk”: the speaker, geographically separated from his wife, finds himself recalling and reliving an earlier moment of close conjunction. Writing from Edinburgh to his wife back in England, Tennyson remembers their honeymoon in Italy:

O love, what hours were thine and mine,
In lands of palm and southern pine;
In lands of palm, of orange-blossom,
Of olive, aloe, and maize and vine.

What Roman strength Turbia showed
In ruin, by the mountain road;
   How like a gem, beneath, the city
Of little Monaco, basking, glowed.

How richly down the rocky dell
The torrent vineyard streaming fell
   To meet the sun and sunny waters,
That only heaved with a summer swell.

(p.186) What slender campanili grew
By bays, the peacock’s neck in hue;
   Where, here and there, on sandy beaches
A milky-belled amaryllis blew.61

The poem’s distinctive rhetorical rhythm—it continues in the same vein for nearly its entire length of over 100 lines—marks it out as a marriage poem. “The Daisy” essentially does away with syntax, consisting as it does entirely of exclamations:

What hours! What strength! How gem-like! The poem offers little more than a catalogue of Italian cities with a thumbnail description of each, and even the descriptions tend to be repetitive (“At Florence too what golden hours” (l. 41)). Towns and remembered incidents follow one after the other without progression. There appears to be no principle of selection; everything is equally relevant, because it was all part of their honeymoon. This is true even of the bad weather that at one point renders the cities indistinguishable from each other, as reflected in perhaps the finest stanza in the poem:

But when we crost the Lombard plain
Remember what a plague of rain;
   Of rain at Reggio, rain at Parma;
At Lodi, rain, Piacenza, rain.

(ll. 49–52)

This ought to be bad or at least dull; a repetitive, all-inclusive list would seem to offer little reward to the reader. Yet all poetry fundamentally depends on repetition. And lists or catalogues have featured in poetry from the Iliad onward, because they participate in poetry’s governing logic of variation within a repeated structure. Like the pleasure of marriage, the intrinsic pleasure of poetry, especially lyric poetry, lies less in change or development than in variegation.
As a lyric of conjugal love, “The Daisy” foregrounds and celebrates this central principle of variety in constancy. It is manifest in the poem’s insistent anaphora (What x...What y), as well as in its topical descriptions, with their identical structure but lavishly individualized details. The principle is best encapsulated, however, by the poem’s stanza form, which manages to be unusually regular and irregular at once. Like Browning in “One Word More” (published, coincidentally, the same year), Tennyson (p.187) introduces an entirely new verse form for his love poem to his wife. Its aaba rhyme scheme gives the stanza an extra degree of uniformity—to repeat an end rhyme three times in a quatrain is virtually unprecedented in English—while also providing a built-in incongruity or variation: the unrhymed third line forms a consistently recurring inconsistency. And the meter reinforces the effect of the rhyme. Perfectly regular through the first couplet, the iambic tetrameter wobbles with the feminine ending of the third line; the extra unstressed syllable then crops up again in the middle of the fourth line, which thus simultaneously supplies (through rhyme) and denies a firm sense of closure.62

Tennyson implicitly suggests a connection between meter and matrimony when he describes how, at one point on the honeymoon, he found a certain poetic “measure” playing endlessly in his head. He remembers

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how we past
From Como, when the light was gray,
And in my head, for half the day,
    The rich Virgilian rustic measure
Of Lari Maxume, all the way,
Like ballad-burthen music, kept[.]
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(ll. 72–7)
“Lari Maxume” (or “maxime”) is Virgil’s name for Lake Como in the *Georgics* (2.159), and the reference is apt: the words appear in a passage in which Virgil, like Tennyson, is listing the glories of Italy. But more notable than the classical allusion is the way the Virgilian earworm recalls an earlier Tennysonian poem of conjugal love. “The Miller’s Daughter” (1832) is an extended dramatic monologue spoken by a country squire to his wife of many years. Recalling the course of their love, the speaker remembers how just before he saw her for the first time, he too, like the speaker of “The Daisy,” was haunted by a poetic rhythm, a “measured strain” beating time in his brain:

A love-song I had somewhere read,
   An echo from a measured strain,
Beat time to nothing in my head
   From some odd corner of the brain.

(p.188) It haunted me, the morning long,
   With weary sameness in the rhymes,
The phantom of a silent song,
   That went and came a thousand times.63

As so often happens, poetry here comes first and love follows after. Two things, however, distinguish this case from, for instance, that of Phebe in *As You Like It* (discussed in Chapter 1). First, the “love-song” the speaker reads provides not a momentary flash of erotic recognition but a constant accompaniment, as befits a poem about marriage. Second, it is not the content of the love song that affects the speaker but its form. The form, moreover, reduced as it is to a mere schema, seems stultifyingly repetitious, an “echo” that with “weary sameness” returns “a thousand times” to the same point. Yet what seems dull in its outline or description is not necessarily so in practice, either in love or in poetry. “The Miller’s Daughter” celebrates the iterative forms and rhythms of married love, preferring them to the passionate expressions of first love; as the speaker asserts, “The kiss, | The woven arms, seem but to be | Weak symbols of the settled bliss” of marriage (ll. 231–3). The same is true of “The Daisy,” which is characterized, like marriage, by a pre-set rhythm (both metrical and rhetorical) into which the details fall as they come. As a result, its structure is not only uniform but in a sense arbitrary—the stanzas could be rearranged, multiplied, or reduced without substantially affecting the meaning; yet it remains as satisfying a love lyric as any that Tennyson wrote.
Despite its repetitive structure, “The Daisy” does not, of course, go on indefinitely but, like the honeymoon it describes, must come to an end. Tennyson concludes by turning from a discursive to a symbolic mode:

> What more? we took our last adieu,
> And up the snowy Splügen drew,
> But ere we reached the highest summit
> I plucked a daisy, I gave it you.
> It told of England then to me,
> And now it tells of Italy.
> O love, we two shall go no longer
> To lands of summer across the sea;

> So dear a life your arms enfold
> Whose crying is a cry for gold:
> Yet here tonight in this dark city,
> When ill and weary, alone and cold,

> I found, though crushed to hard and dry,
> This nurseling of another sky
> Still in the little book you lent me,
> And where you tenderly laid it by:

> And I forgot the clouded Forth,
> The gloom that saddens Heaven and Earth,
> The bitter east, the misty summer
> And gray metropolis of the North.

> Perchance, to lull the throbs of pain,
> Perchance, to charm a vacant brain,
> Perchance, to dream you still beside me,
> My fancy fled to the South again.

(ll. 85–108)

The daisy functions much like Heaney’s skunk: it defamiliarizes the speaker’s wife by associating her with a distant time and place and so reignites erotic “fancy.” As in Heaney, though, the symbol comprises multiple layers. At first the flower “told of England,” site of the couple’s courtship; now it “tells of Italy,” site of their honeymoon. But the first meaning is necessarily included in the second, and to these the speaker now adds a third association: the England of the present moment, where his wife and child are. Like the flower, the ambiguous phrase “the South” in the final line embraces all three of these spacetimes at once.
By referring to the daisy as a “nurseling,” moreover, and picturing how his wife “tenderly” enclosed it in a book, Tennyson directly associates it with the baby whom her “arms enfold.” Both the flower and the child are said to mark an endpoint: the daisy an end to their honeymoon ("our last adieu"), the child an end to their overseas travel more generally ("we two shall go no longer," presumably because of the financial commitment—the "cry for gold"—the baby represents). Yet both also point toward the future. This is obviously true of the child but also of the daisy, which was plucked not at the very end of their Italian sojourn but just before ("ere we reached the highest summit"), and which even then told of the England of their new life together as much as of the land of their origin. The daisy is thus a marker of stability—a fixed point, the extended description of which puts an end to the restless catalogue of the preceding stanzas—and also a sign of variability and imaginative open-endedness. Hence the anaphora of the final stanza ("Perchance… Perchance…Perchance"), a classic tricolon that is formally conclusive but semantically indeterminate. Hence also the twofold textualization of the matrimonial daisy. Pressed between the pages of a book, the flower becomes a touchstone, a fixed shape that accompanies the speaker even when he is unaware. Preserved a second time in the form of the poem we are now reading, and pressed into service as a poetic symbol, the daisy assumes a new, more dynamic form whose meanings continue to ramify.

Notes:


(6) de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World*, 376.


(9) Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*, 98. The first half of part 2 of the treatise is entitled “Aesthetic Validity of Marriage.”


The topic of marriage in the novel is a large one, but it is worth observing that the day-to-day doings of happily married couples are more frequently represented in works that themselves appeared in installments. Agatha Christie’s married sleuths Tommy and Tuppence appear in four novels together, as do Dorothy Sayers’s Harriet Vane and Lord Peter Wimsey (though they marry only in the fourth). The life of a happy couple has similarly formed the staple of televised comedy series ever since *I Love Lucy*. These twentieth-century instances have Victorian precursors, such as the Pooters in George and Weedon Grossmith’s *The Diary of a Nobody* (serialized in 1888–89 and published as a book in 1892). All these couples have their occasional difficulties, of course, but marital disharmony does not form the focus of the narrative or its main interest. On the topic of seriality, see Markovits, *The Victorian Verse-Novel*, ch. 2.


On lyric time, see Introduction, p. 8 and Chapter 4, p. 152.


Lisa M. Klein, “‘Let us love, deare love, lyke as we ought’: Protestant Marriage and the Revision of Petrarchan Loving in Spenser’s *Amoretti*,” *Spenser Studies*, 10 (1992), 109–37.*Love and Marriage* Amoretti*Paradise Lost* The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce

(21) As a result, all the poems considered here concern heterosexual love, which is an unfortunate limitation. They are all also, incidentally, in English; for this there is no particular reason, although Hancock does suggest that English-language poets were groundbreaking in their attention to conjugal affection.

(22) In discussing *The Angel in the House* I focus exclusively on books 1 and 2, *The Betrothal* (1854) and *The Espousals* (1856). Two further books, dealing almost entirely with different characters, were added later.


(24) See, e.g., Hancock, “The Chemistry of Love Poetry,” 212: “we should look more closely at Patmore before characterising him as...the poet of attachment. Felix may be writing from within a marriage in *The Angel in the House*, but he is primarily writing about a courtship.” Markovits notes that the subsequent installments (books 3 and 4) do depict a marriage, and indeed follow it (at least speculatively) past death and into the afterlife; see Markovits, *The Victorian Verse-Novel*, ch. 2.


(27) It is never made explicit that the speaker of the Preludes is to be identified with Felix; often the lyrics are impersonal and didactic. But the speaker does sometimes use the first person, and he speaks from the position of one who knows about marriage; see, e.g., “The Churl” (1.12, P3) and “Joy and Use” (2.7, P1).
Most of the poem’s words belong to Honoria and (especially) Felix, but it also includes long passages spoken or written by various relations, including an example of juvenile verse by Honoria’s younger sister Mary (1.2.2); the final line of the poem is spoken by a family friend (2, Epi. 4). It is notable, however, that all these forms of discourse, even Mary’s poem, are presented in the same meter and verse form as Felix’s narrative. Just as married love is mediated, even more than other forms of love, through the outside world, so the world is necessarily mediated for the couple, filtered by the precondition of their married state.

The poem was written during Elizabeth Barrett’s courtship with Robert Browning and appears as the penultimate poem of her Sonnets from the Portuguese, which recounts the course of that courtship and ends with the expectation of their wedding.


From Daniel’s A Defence of Ryme (1603), quoted in Patmore, “Essay,” 40.

The term “jointure” can simply mean “conjunction,” but in Daniel’s time it was commonly used to refer to property held by a husband for his wife or widow (OED, sv. “jointure,” n. 4). Patmore eroticizes rhyme again a few pages after the Prologue, referring to the “returning kiss of rhymes” (1.2, P1).


The rituals the couple goes through include such social necessities as meeting the bride’s extended family, including her disapproving aunt, and attending the county ball together. The Prologue to book 2 immediately follows “The Abdication” in the completed poem; before the addition of the second book in 1856, book 1 concluded with an Epilogue similarly showing the couple together on their ninth anniversary.

(37) See, e.g., Shakespeare’s sonnets 32 (“If thou survive...O, then vouchsafe”) and 136 (“If thy soul check thee...Then in the number let me pass”), in both of which the apodosis begins in l. 9.


(40) According to Jesus’ words in the gospels, marriage ends at death; in heaven “they neither marry nor are given in marriage” (Matt. 22:30; Mark 12:25; Luke 20:35).

(41) It is worth comparing Bradstreet’s poem to the nearly contemporary marriage lyric embedded in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667), when Eve expresses her love for Adam (4.639–55). Though structured differently, in two mirroring halves, Eve’s poem recalls Bradstreet’s in its use of repetition and anaphora, its rejection of time (“I forget all time”), and above all in its playing with the idea of doubt or lack from a position of secure possession.

(42) Hadas thus follows the example of George Meredith, whose sequence about a failed marriage, “Modern Love” (1862), takes the form of fifty sixteen-line “sonnets.” Hadas’s poems are written primarily in iambic pentameter, which reinforces their resemblance to traditional sonnets.


(47) Hadas, *Mirrors of Astonishment*, 74, 73.

(49) Hadas, *Mirrors of Astonishment*, 76.


(51) Hancock, “The Chemistry of Love Poetry,” 222.

(52) See, e.g., Jonathan Allison, “Acts of Union: Seamus Heaney’s Tropes of Sex and Marriage,” *Éire-Ireland*, 27 (1992), 106–21; Allison writes: “In Heaney’s poetry, marriage can be a moment of social disruption as well as of interpersonal union” (p. 108). On the ritualistic connotations of marriage, see also Karen Marguerite Moloney, *Seamus Heaney and the Emblems of Hope* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007), which focuses not on marriage as human sacrifice (as Allison does) but on the ancient Irish myth of the “marriage of sovereignty,” by which a ruler binds himself to the land. Similar political subtexts are also evident in Boland’s marriage poems in *Against Love Poetry*.


(57) The conversation thus recalls Frost’s earlier poem “Blueberries,” another dialogue between a couple (this one apparently longer married), which also concerns the uncertain line between public and private.


(60) A similar temporal layering, though even more complex, can be found in Browning’s “By the Fire-Side” (1855), in which the speaker looks forward to a future when he will sit at home with his wife silently remembering the moment he first declared his love for her, even while, in the present, the speaker is already doing just that.


(62) Tennyson said that he had “the Horatian Alcaic” in mind when he came up with the stanza form, which he later reused with slight variations in other epistolary poems; see The Poems of Tennyson, ed. Ricks, ii. 494. The aaba rhyme scheme (though with a different meter) made its most significant and influential appearance in English verse a few years later in Edward FitzGerald’s Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám (1859).

(63) “The Miller’s Daughter,” ll. 65–72. Although the poem was originally published in 1832, these lines first appeared in the now canonical version of 1842.