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Chris Roulston, *Narrating Marriage in Eighteenth-Century England and France*. Burlington, Vt. and Farnham, Surrey. 2010. xi + 227 pp. 3 black and white illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$99.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-0-7546-6839-8.

Review by Nadine Bérenguier, University of New Hampshire.

Historians of the family agree that the eighteenth century played a pivotal role in the evolution of the institution of marriage. Yet, as a stable conjugal relationship, marriage was rarely perceived as worthy narrative material. When eighteenth-century literary sources discussed marriage as an institution and questioned the role of marriage as primarily a strategic alliance, they paid scant attention to the conjugal relationship itself, privileging courtship or adultery narratives. This relative absence gave the impetus to *Narrating Marriage*, in which Chris Roulston considers marriage not just as an institution but as a relationship between individuals. Her study not only provides a transnational perspective by considering both French and English sources but also considers the role of eighteenth-century fiction in the debates around the evolution of the modern couple.

The first chapter (“Advice Literature and the Meaning of Marriage”) focuses on a wide range of prescriptive texts that comment on conjugal life as way to engineer private behaviors and implement social change. In England, conjugal advice was primarily found in sermons and periodical literature with an emphasis on companionship and on the home. In France, marital advice took a more scientific bent because it appeared in paramedical treatises that highlighted the conjugal body. Chris Roulston is careful to point to the differences between these disparate sources, but she also draws attention to how they all negotiated the “tension between the ideal narrative of marriage and the everyday reality in its refashioning of the private sphere” (p. 17). This leads her to wonder whether advice literature supported new claims about the right to individual choice in marriage as a way to conceal the lack of changes in the legal and material conditions of conjugal arrangements. She convincingly shows that advice literature, by privileging marriage as the human relationship *par excellence*, turned it into a burden as much as a source of fulfillment.

The second chapter (“Accounting for Marriage”) states that while marriage was a much-debated topic in the culture of the period, conjugal life hardly qualified as worthwhile matter for fiction. Indeed, how can the prosaic nature of a balanced and somewhat uneventful marriage satisfy the narrative progression necessary to a novelistic plot? This question is particularly relevant for the idealized conjugal relationships at the center of Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela 2* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*. She makes a persuasive (but not so new) case for the tensions that exist in novels in which marriage is at once separate from passion and intimately linked to the more thrilling events that preceded the conjugal bliss. To differentiate these conjugal narratives from their more transgressive counterparts (usually revolving around courtship or adultery), Chris Roulston resorts to the concept of “accountability.” It does capture Pamela and Julie’s efforts to reclaim their identity by “making themselves accountable” to the institutional demands of marriage (p. 59). Whether the protagonist marries for love (Pamela) or submits to her father’s authority (Julie), marriage, even an ideal one, appears to be about work as much it is about love. Yet, paradoxically, because “accountability” is not synonymous with complete transparency, the new intimacy at the core of these novels can remain capable of narration because it is threatened. At the end of her analyses, Chris Roulston is led to ponder

whether the idealized marriage ultimately can be narrated at all.

In the third chapter (“Marriage and the Colonial Imagination”) Chris Roulston focuses on Isabelle de Charrière’s *Letters of Mistriss Henley Published by her Friend* and Sarah Scott’s *The History of Sir George Ellison* to connect marriage to the expansion of the English and French empires, borrowing theoretical concepts from the work of Felicity Nussbaum, Rachel Bowlby, and Edward Saïd.<sup>[1]</sup> The relationship that Felicity Nussbaum establishes between “the construction of the domestic space and the building of an empire” (p. 13), the semantic proximity of domesticity and of colonial domestication (Bowlby), and the representation of the East as the unstable feminine (Saïd) justify the parallel Chris Roulston identifies between domestic space, nation, and empire. Her analyses of Scott and Charrière’s novels consider how the empire intrudes upon domestic space and its boundaries. In *Letters of Mistriss Henley* in particular, some of the narrative elements that she emphasizes, especially the recurring presence of India, offer a fresh reading of Charrière’s novel.

After considering external sources of conjugal disruption, Chris Roulston turns to disorders stemming from the conjugal relationship itself. The fourth chapter (“Disruptive Wives and the Balance of Power”) examines the unsettling expression of female autonomy in marriage and exposes “as a fiction the notion of equality generated by the companionate ideal” (p. 128). This is not a surprising conclusion, but the variety of sources—from French visual works to popular English fictions, such as Richardson’s *Clarissa* and *Sir Charles Grandison*, as well as the fairly obscure French novel by Samuel de Constant, *Le Mari sentimental*—reveal the deep-seated and multifaceted anxiety toward female attempts at autonomy within marriage. Somewhat inconsistent in this chapter appears the choice of Anna Howe, from Richardson’s *Clarissa*, as an example of female defiance in marriage, since the disruption comes from her stubborn refusal to tie the knot, not her conjugal behavior. This does not, however, lessen the overall merit of her analyses.

To be narratable, marriage depends not only on the actions of “disruptive wives,” but also on the “unraveling” caused by male conjugal violence. The fifth chapter, “Narrating Wife-Abuse,” draws attention to the plight of the abused wife both in sentimental and gothic fiction, with readings of Eliza Heywood’s *Story of Miss Betsy Thoughtless*, the Fitzpatrick marriage episode in Samuel’s Fielding’s *Tom Jones*, Maria Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent*, Stéphanie de Genlis’ “The History of the Duchess of C,” and Nicolas-Edmé Restif de la Bretonne’s *Ingénue Saxancour ou la femme séparée*. In her close textual readings, Chris Roulston argues that the conjugal degradation caused by male violence does not constitute a radical break from the ideal companionate marriage promoted by Rousseau and Richardson. This is particularly salient in her analysis of “the marital gothic,” which she presents as the ultimate “allegory of the danger of absolute privacy” (p. 171).<sup>[2]</sup> Whether they are idealized or demonized, these fictional husbands embody the absolute legal control that men enjoyed over their wives in the eighteenth century. Chris Roulston concludes, in other words, that idealized and dysfunctional marriages are on a continuum rather than on opposite sides.

In its last chapter, “Having it both ways? The Eighteenth-Century *Ménage-à-trois*,” the book draws attention to an unusual type of conjugal narrative: the *ménage-à-trois* involving a wife, her female friend, and her husband. Chris Roulston presents this constellation, which reverses the triangular situation of classic adultery, as appearing “to be both an act of transgression, and a domestication of the transgression” (p. 189). Because the English literary tradition offers more examples of such arrangements than the French, she relies heavily on English narratives, such as Charles Brockden Brown’s *Ormond, or the Secret Witness*, Sarah Fielding’s inset piece “The Story of Caelia and Chloe” in *The Governess*, Sarah Scott’s *Millenium Hall*, and Jane Barker’s “The Unaccountable Wife” to make her case. When considering the French context, she has to limit her choice to Rousseau’s *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse*. While some female pairings “reinforce the marital institution” albeit “with a twist” (p. 201) by replicating the ideals of the companionate model as in *Ormond*, “The story of Caelia and Chloe,” and *Millenium Hall*, others call into question the companionate ideal and undermine it from within, as is the

case in “The Unaccountable Wife” and *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Less unsettling than adultery because they allow the conjugal narrative to endure, these female couplings embody “the various anxieties surrounding the bourgeois marriage” (p. 207).

*Narrating Marriage* undoubtedly fills a gap in eighteenth-century literary scholarship not because the issue of marriage as a social, religious, and legal institution has been neglected, but because very few book-length studies have examined marriage as conjugal life, with all its routine and repetition. Such a scarcity of scholarly studies should come as no surprise, as Chris Roulston suggests, since eighteenth-century novelists did not deem stable marital life interesting enough to be a central feature of their narratives. The fact that she devotes her book to both French and English fictions points to such a challenge, since she needs to draw from two traditions to gather enough narrative matter to fuel her analyses. Aware of the risks that such a transnational perspective entails because of the differences between the two countries, Chris Roulston also recognizes the benefits of comparing two cultures for the light they shed on each other.

Chris Roulston’s competent use of theoretical tools and her familiarity with the work of other scholars give much acumen to her arguments and depth to her close textual readings. She skillfully weaves the concepts of the theoreticians Jürgen Habermas, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michel Foucault into her analyses and is conversant with scholars who have theorized on desire in the construction of narratives, in particular René Girard, Tony Tanner, and Peter Brooks. She draws on the postcolonial theory of Edward Saïd and refers to the seminal work of Felicity Nussbaum to explore the connections between the conjugal and the colonial in eighteenth-century novels. She effectively incorporates the feminist theory of Judith Butler and Carol Pateman and recent feminist historiography of the early modern period, using the work of Joan DeJean, Michelle Massé, Laura Runge, Joan Stewart, and Marie Trouille, among others. The dialogue Chris Roulston establishes with scholars from different disciplines, far from obscuring her own critical stance, bolsters her argument that eighteenth-century narratives present conjugal life as an ideal to strive for, while simultaneously depicting it as unnarratable. Although the canonical works of the corpus elicit more predictable readings, *Narrating Marriage in Eighteenth-Century England and France* provides a very valuable synthesis about the role of narrative fiction in uncovering the deep-seated anxieties that accompanied the idealized models of conjugality promoted during the Enlightenment.

## NOTES

[1] Felicity A. Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995); Rachel Bowlby, “Domestication,” in Diane Elam and Robyn Wiegman, eds., *Feminism beside itself* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Edward Saïd, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993).

[2] The concept of “marital gothic” was coined by Michelle Massé in her book *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 21.

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