Avant-propos

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The aim of this volume[1] is to present an overview of the issues raised by what I call the nuptial or conjugal imaginary in early modern France. The period from the early sixteenth century to the Revolution was one of upheaval for marriage, as for so many other social institutions. The Catholic Church was forced to react in the face of Protestant challenges to the most fundamental principles governing marriage. For Protestant theologians, marriage was not a sacrament, and procreation need not be its primary goal.[2] Within Biblical strictures, each Protestant couple was responsible for determining the function of marriage in their lives. This radical adjustment in thinking nonetheless took place in a context of great respect for the institution, which in the Protestant view required a publicly-announced engagement period, supervised by families. This position represented a criticism of the Catholic tradition that accepted *paroles de présent* as a sufficient basis for marriage, thus leading to the possibility of clandestine unions (Gaudemet 278-87).

The problem of clandestine marriage was simultaneously raised by the French monarchy.[3] The disposal of property and other forms of wealth, without family and State interests being taken into account, resulted in the issuance of a decree by Henri II in 1556 outlawing marriage without parental consent for men under 30 and women under 25 (Gaudemet 314-15). The Council of Trent (1545-1563) avoided the debate over the thorny question of marriage until the last year of its mandate, when it was forced by pressure from the French monarchy on the one hand and from the Protestant challenge on the other to adopt a position against clandestine marriage (the "Tametsi" decree) (Gaudemet 286-95). The result was to reinforce the role of fathers in contracting marriages for their progeny.

The growing patriarchal domination of marriage is well described by Evelyne Berriot-Salvadore (1990:24-43). The father as the purveyor in the home of "good government" reflected the patriarchal monarchy in France: the absolutism of Louis XIV emphasized the role of the King as the father of his people, and as the representative on earth of God the Father. By 1670, a *Traité du mariage* composed by lawyers for the Crown pronounced definitively that the parliaments and the King had supreme power over the regulation of marriage, diminishing the role of the Church to a significant extent (Gaudemet 325). Civil authorities tended to be more severe in their treatment of "wayward" women than were ecclesiastical courts (see Hanley), and they handed fathers and husbands more power over women's lives. Nevertheless, after more than a century of crisis surrounding the institution, we also witness in the seventeenth century impressive growth in the number of women writers who put this power into question.[4] Not surprisingly, the problem of power relations in marriage turns up in every essay in this volume.

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1. I wish to thank Hans R. Runte and the editorial board of *Dalhousie French Studies*, especially Karolyn Waterson, for their support of this project.

2. The licit satisfaction of sexual desire was, for example, a legitimate reason for Protestant marriage. Calvin and Luther insisted that neither partner has the right to refuse conjugal relations since this would encourage adultery (Berriot-Salvadore 1993:79-82).

3. See the new book by Hasse-Dubosc for a stimulating examination of the problem of potential brides kidnapped, against their will or not.

4. I examine the *mise en question* of marriage at the end of the century in "Imagining Marriage in the 1690s," forthcoming in *Papers on French Seventeenth-Century Literature*.

The articles collected here reflect the preoccupations, even obsessions, surrounding marriage over three centuries, with one look back at the late Middle Ages. By soliciting scholarship that touches upon texts of different genres, it has been my goal to bring together most of the key themes that make up the nuptial imaginary, thus making the intersections among them more clear. Satire, varieties of fiction, philosophical tracts, medical treatises, memoirs, royal panegyrics, correspondence, documents from the popular press and theatre approach marriage from diverse angles. The perspectives of early modern male and female writers are included; gender is a significant element in the treatment of this highly gendered topic. What all of the texts have in common is the expression of fear and desire. The male writers often appear to fear women, and want to control the dangers they represent; conversely, the female writers tend to fear the institution of marriage and propose alterations in the institution to suit women's needs better. These fears and desires express themselves in several topics that recur throughout this collection, most markedly the role that economics, class conflict, medical condition, and religion play in the process of arranging marriage, living within its boundaries, or terminating it through death, separation, or divorce.

Since marriage was a union between families even more than between individuals, a suitable match meant compatibility in wealth and social class, to say nothing of religion. Economic disparity within the couple could generate tremendous tension when the wife came from a wealthier background than her husband, as **Iris Black**'s article shows. The economic component of the misogynistic tradition of the Middle Ages continued to develop and is alluded to in the studies by **Martha M. Houle**, **Adrienne E. Zuerner**, **Ruth P. Thomas**, and **Nadine Bérenguier**. Although legally minors, women could have access to financial influence and sometimes outright control of family finances, in case of war or widowhood, for example—or abdication of responsibility on the part of her husband (see the articles by Zuerner and **Claire Carlin**). Financial misconduct by a husband was one of the only means for a woman to distance herself from an abusive spouse. But even a *séparation de biens* was difficult to come by, as seen in **Rosena Davison**'s analysis of the marriage of Madame d'Épinay, and it did not automatically include a *séparation de corps*.[5]

Closely linked to the money question is the problem of social class. The best-known literary example of a disastrous mismatch is probably Molière's *George Dandin*: the warning is clear, social climbing leads to misery. But the issue becomes more complicated in the eighteenth century as more texts address the decadence of the aristocracy and question the notion that adultery is normal for men. Louis XIV made public liaisons acceptable for the King, as **Kathleen Wine** shows. Does the seeming trend toward adultery as *spectacle* stem from the Sun King's model? What must always remain hidden for women on threat of incarceration in a convent becomes for noble men an ostentatious practice. Voices of protest defending a more bourgeois conception of morality come to the fore, but rarely from male aristocrats; compare the articles by Nadine Bérenguier, Rosena Davison, Ruth Thomas, and **Janet Whatley**. **Constance Cartmill** describes Madame de Sévigné's criticism of Grignan for the bourgeois behaviour of one who loves his wife too much. In the eighteenth century, tensions arising from the influence of "bourgeois" discourse, even among the nobility, are growing.

The immense gap between reaction to male and female adultery, a topic treated by Black, **Nancy Frelick** and Houle in its manifestations prior to 1700, is examined in the context of medical theory by **Kathryn Hoffmann**. The preoccupation with proof of virginity is one sign of the fear that female infidelity could contaminate family lines.

5. A celebrated case of the late 1660s and beyond was that of Hortense Mancini, who published her memoirs after failing to obtain a *séparation de corps* from her husband, the Duc de Mazarin. On the fascinating memoirs by Hortense and her sisters Marie, see Goldsmith as well as Mancini.

Although physicians influenced by Galen believed that women's sexual pleasure was necessary for conception to occur,[6] the valorization of the female role in creation (of babies, of the universe) explored by **Kathleen Perry Long**, is a rarity. Women's bodies are a source of fear at least as often as they are a source of desire in the texts that make up the nuptial imaginary. The strategies developed to combat negative depictions of women had to be subtle in order to become integrated into patriarchal discourse,[7] a message that becomes clear when reading the work of Frelick, **Colette H. Winn**, Carlin, Thomas, and Baxter. **Douglas C. Baxter** demonstrates that an inexperienced sixteen-year-old countess could have an impact on royal marriages—provided she played within the rules of her society. The subversive discourse of women writers like Marguerite de Navarre, Jacqueline de Miremont, and Jeanne de Schomberg appeared to respect male dominance, but by the time Madame Riccoboni was publishing her novels in the atmosphere of the Enlightenment, more overt criticism of the status quo was possible.

The institution of marriage was increasingly subject to question: separation and divorce come constantly to the fore in eighteenth-century texts, although the *topos* was certainly present during the time of crisis in the last half of the sixteenth century.[8] As the Revolution approaches, the move beyond a mere *séparation de biens* or *séparation de corps* to a modern notion of divorce becomes, as Janet Whatley says, thinkable. **Gabrielle Verdier** puts it well in a fitting conclusion to this volume: "Adieu au mariage d'Ancien Régime." Nonetheless, the reader may be struck by the continuing resonance of the themes explored here. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*?

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6. Berriot-Salvadore explores these "seminal theories" (the belief that women emitted semen) in 1993:71-87.
7. I offer as a counter-example *Les misères de la femme mariée*, a powerful sixteenth-century poem written by Nicole Estienne, the wife of the physician Jean Liébault (see Hoffmann for some of Liébault's medical theories). Estienne was responding to the famous *Stances du mariage* by Philippe Desportes, but her text fell into oblivion until 1980s feminist criticism revived it, whereas Desportes' poem has been much anthologized.
8. See my "Misères et épines dans la forêt nuptiale au tournant du siècle," forthcoming in *D'un siècle à l'autre, 1595-1610* (Fasano: Schena, 2000).