PUT A RING ON IT: MARRIAGE AND SYMBOLISM IN PILGRIMAGE

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In *Pilgrimage*, Richardson moves away from the traditional romance plot and draws on the scepticism towards marriage found in New Woman Fiction. At a time when women's social, political, legal and career opportunities were still limited, the only choice for many women was marriage. *Pilgrimage*, however, sees Miriam searching for alternative options; and Richardson uses Miriam's resistance to marriage as a device to address wider social concerns. As so often in Richardson's work, her purpose is revealed in the minutiae: a focus on the hand, and the ring finger in particular.

A discussion of hands in *Pilgrimage* reaches further than one might expect. Richardson's hands reveal the complex relationships between class, gender, and subjectivity. As many critics have noted, Miriam's uncertain gender identity has as its correlative a narrative hesitancy about representations of embodiment. Depictions of the whole body are absent from the text. Instead it offers up body fragments: a wrist, a forearm, a face, each signifying an aspect of feminine subjectivity. In this respect, *Pilgrimage* is just one example of the fragmentation typical of modernist literature and art; but the emphasis on the hand is unusual. In *Pointed Roofs* alone there are in excess of one hundred references to hands. In *Pilgrimage* as a whole, hands become a medium through which Miriam relates both to herself and to others.

Hands have always been, and still are, indicative of social status. In the nineteenth-century, the physical appearance of the hand revealed the class and social position of its owner. A lady should possess a milky-white soft hand, never seen outdoors without gloves, the rough and coarse hands of a servant were the physical embodiment of her labour. Then as now hands signified not just class, but gender, but here there was more scope for free play. The 'wrong' kind of hands might escape the biological determinism of

sex, permitting a new and different understanding of the body and gender roles. Focusing on the symbolism of the hand, the ring finger, and rings in the early chapter-volumes, this article traces Miriam's complicated relationship with the institution of marriage in *Pilgrimage*.

The Hand and Marriage

In a proposal, it is not the body but the hand which is asked for in marriage. 'Handfasting' is a term for common-law marriage. The fourth digit – the ring finger or annulus – is particularly associated with marital status. The wedding ring worn on the fourth finger defines the hand as a married hand. John Manning in *The Finger Book* tells us that 'the Egyptians believed a delicate nerve ran from the fourth finger of the left hand to the heart […] so what better finger on which to wear a wedding ring'.[1] Manning quotes Henry Swinburne's 1680 work *Treatise of Spousals* which states that anatomists 'had found a vein rather than a nerve, the *vena amoris*, which passes from the ring finger to the heart'.[2] The ringed hand defines the wife as property. From the age-old dowry system to the exchanges in trade and land marriages enabled, the institution has been used to secure positions of wealth and power. The ring secures a wife and the promise of children. In sociocultural terms, the principles of marriage have not changed dramatically, but they have been re-branded, so to speak.

In consumer society the story told about marriage may be about the romantic union of two people – purely for love; but marriage also promises financial security, children, and status, signified by the visible display of the engagement and the wedding rings. In the marriage market the wedding is a performance that is also a device to secure a desirable social status. The marriage proposal is, as Phillip Vannini argues, a 'spectacle': 'a performance that is inevitably shaped by the greater sociocultural environment in which it is enmeshed and by the audience present'.[3] In that

[1] John Manning, *The Finger Book* (London: Faber, 2008), p.112.
[2] Ibid.
[3] Phillip Vannini, 'Will You Marry Me?: Spectacle and Consumption in the Ritual of Marriage Proposals', *Journal of Popular Culture*, 38, 1 (2004): 174.

spectacle, the ring is symbol of performative success: success not only in securing a partner but in securing the desirable status of being a married woman.

But this is where Miriam comes unstuck. She is neither able to 'perform' correctly nor is she really certain that being a married woman is what she desires. Like all Miriam's opinions, her thoughts on marriage are fluid. She moves from seeing it as a form of safety, envying her sisters' newly found security within the bonds of matrimony, to hating it as a form of bondage that causes her to dislike men as well. Internalising the contradictions of her social situation, Miriam has a fractured identity: part of her is still influenced by her traditional upbringing – she is a product of her time; but another part is attracted to the idea of the New Woman. She straddles two lives, not completely happy with either.

The sociological literature of the time reflects Miriam's dilemma. Following the standard contemporary view that women are more emotional and orientated towards the body, and men more intellectual and rational, Émile Durkheim nonetheless argued that:

> Being a more instinctive creature than man, woman has only to follow her instincts to find calmness and peace. She thus does not require so strict a social regulation as marriage, and particularly as monogamic marriage.[4]

Durkheim recognised that, as feminist historians, Janet Fink and Katherine Holden, argue: the 'gendered nature of the British marriage contract…operated to contain women's sexuality and reproduction'.[5] He was an early critic of the double standard, where:

> Custom, moreover, grants [the man] certain privileges which allow him in some measure to lessen the strictness of the

[4] Émile Durkheim, *Suicide* [1897] (New York: Free Press, 1963), p.272.
[5] Janet Fink and Katherine Holden, 'Pictures from the Margins of Marriage: Representations of Spinsters and Single Mothers in the mid-Victorian Novel, Inter-war Hollywood Melodrama and British Film of the 1950s and 1960s', *Gender and History*, 11, 2 (1999): 233.

> regime. There is no compensation or relief for the woman. Monogamy is strictly obligatory for her. [...] The regulation therefore is a restraint to her without any great advantages.[6]

Edward Tiryakian summarises Durkheim's controversial theory:

> Even more radical is his conclusion that although marriage and its function are seen as a sacrifice of man of his 'polygamous instincts,' in fact (or in the light of sociological analysis), it is man who benefits more from marriage than woman, and by accepting monogamy, 'it was she who made a sacrifice'.[7]

Durkheim and Miriam reach the same conclusion. Miriam is similarly opposed to a contract in which the man is able to enjoy a more relaxed regime, but the woman is obliged to uphold it at all times. Like Durkheim, she understands marriage as disadvantageous compared with the possibility of an enlightening, self-exploratory, solitary journey.

Miriam's Initial Thoughts

One of the first examples of Miriam's views on marriage is given in *Pointed Roofs*. Miriam considers the German girls at the school in Hanover:

> What they were going to do with their lives was only too plain […] And they were placid and serene, secure in a kind of security Miriam had never met before. They did not seem to be in the least afraid of the future. She envied that. Their eyes and their hands were serene. . . . They would have houses and things they could do and understand, always. […]
>
> She thought of their comfortable German homes, of ruling and shopping and directing and being looked up to. . . . German husbands.

[6] Durkheim, p.272.
[7] Edward A. Tiryakian, 'Sexual Anomie, Social Structure, Societal Change', *Social Forces*, 59 (1981): 1030.

That thought she shirked.[8]

This illustrates the duality of Miriam's feelings towards marriage: while she can appreciate the security found in such a life and is envious of it, she cannot factor in the role of the husband. Even at this early stage it is an idea that she 'shirks'. Also noted in the depiction of the girls' hands as 'serene' is the security and knowledge marriage brings: the girls know what their future will entail and, furthermore, that they will be accomplished at it. Miriam is 'astounded to discover, [they] had already a complete outfit of house-linen to which they were now adding fine embroideries and laces. All could cook' (I 82). Unlike Miriam, these girls are already domesticated and ready for their future roles as wives; their hands are already taking up the mantle, busily employed by cooking and working to add embellishments and finery to an already certain future. Miriam has neither these hands nor, indeed, their abilities. Her hands are not 'serene', as she is not certain of her role, nor does she feel that they hold control over a certain, prescribed future.

Another example is seen in *Backwater* when, overhearing conversation between the girls at the Pernes' school, Miriam is returned to the idea of marriage and shocked by one of the girls, Jessie Wheeler's, 'extraordinary idea' of wanting lots of children:

> 'Kids are jolly. A1. I hope I have lots' […] 'Hope your husband'll think so too, my dear' said Polly, getting up. 'Oh, of course, I should only have them if the fellow wanted me to' (I 251).

This reaffirms Miriam's dislike of the unequal nature of marriage and reflects Durkheim's theory of woman's 'sacrifice' in marriage. These young girls, excited and eager to find a husband ('Fancy never having a fellow. I should go off my nut' (I 251)), are bound for a life of putting aside their own desires, acquiescing to their husbands and doing only what the 'fellow wanted them to'. A

[8] Dorothy Richardson, *Pilgrimage* Vol.1 (London: Virago, 1979), p.82. From here on page references in text.

dutiful role which is completely incompatible with Miriam's standpoint.

The first glimpse of marriage for the Henderson sisters themselves arises when Miriam receives a letter from Eve, telling of Harriett's engagement. Harriett had asked Eve to write as 'she does not like to write about it herself' (I 179), an indication that she is uncertain of Miriam's reaction. Here, Miriam reads the letter with 'steady hands' (I 179):

> regularly in the seat behind us at All Saints' for months – saw her with the Pooles at a concert at the Assembly Rooms and made up his mind then – the moment he saw her – joined the tennis-club – they won the doubles handicap – a beautiful Slazenger racquet – only just over sixteen – for years – of course Mother says it's just foolish nonsense – but I'm not sure that she really thinks so – Gerald took me into his confidence – made a solemn call – *admirably* suited to each other – rather a long melancholy good-looking face – they look such a contrast […] of course Harry could not let you come without knowing […] hardly any strawberries – we shall see you soon – everybody sends. (I 180)

After rapidly absorbing the information, Miriam is left in a state of confusion and the text's fractured form, which starts with long and then moves to very short sentences, reflects her disjointed state of mind. As she sits with the girls in the German school, her thoughts move incoherently. At one moment: 'She hardly knew them. She passed half-blindly amongst them' (I 180). But this then quickly reverses: 'She knew every line of each of them. They were her old friends. They knew her' (I 180). When her confusion subsides, she makes her final effort to remove herself emotionally (and imminently physically) from the stifling school and these girls as she realises that she is 'English and free. She had nothing to do with this German School' (I 180-1). In this way, Harriett's engagement offers hope, but with it comes uncertainty.

When the evening arrives for Miriam to leave the school, her steadfastness is dissipating and this is evidenced in the appearance

of her hands: her once 'steady hands' become 'large and shaky' (I 183) reflecting the uncertainty of her future. Harriett's engagement, which had originally been a source of boasting to the other girls and a reason for leaving ('Well you see there are all sorts of things happening at home. I *must* go. One of my sisters is engaged' (I 182)), now has new connotations which leave Miriam feeling inadequate:

> Hurriedly and desolately she packed her bag. She was going home *empty-handed*. She had achieved nothing. Fraulein had made not the slightest effort to keep her. She was just nothing again – with her Saratoga trunk and her hand-bag. *Harriett had achieved*. Harriett. She was just going home with nothing to say for herself. (I 183-4; my emphasis)

This stresses Miriam's own sense of failure, revealing that she still holds marriage in high esteem at this point. Finding a husband, engagement and marriage is shown here to be a definite achievement: 'Harriett had achieved'. Unfortunately, in such a time and in her own opinion, Miriam's own journey – finding a position, travelling to a different country alone, working and being respected in the workplace – is certainly not an achievement. The phrase 'empty-handed' also gains significance here. Miriam is travelling home literally empty-handed – there is no ring adorning her hand, she brings with her no future prospects comparable to those of Harriett.

With this ring, I thee…

The wedding ring offers an outward expression of one's marital status. The ringless hand marks out a hand that has either never had that status or has lost it. The hand tells of one's position in – or out – of the marriage market. But the symbolism of the ring extends further; with it also comes a display of the wealth of the fiancé and a display of one's social standing. The engagement ring is directly associated with the status of the couple. Shirley Ogletree comments that 'the cost of an engagement ring was positively

associated with the man's and woman's income'.[9] In the woman's eyes (not to mention in the eyes of other women) the size of the ring reflected the strength of the man's love for her.[10] The ring can also symbolise presence: the presence of the fiancé, wife or husband in one's life, so that even when the couple are apart it is a material sign of the lover and a symbol of his or her love. The ring signifies on several levels.

As Jean Baudrillard argues 'an object itself is nothing; it is the signification and relations which surround, conflict and permeate this given object which invest it with cultural meaning'.[11] This is true of the engagement ring; but while the engagement ring possesses and displays many differing factors relating to the intended couple, the wedding ring itself can be seen as a little more steadfast. Simpler in its design, it further signifies the state of being married than the more ostentatious display of the engagement ring. Baudrillard contends that in 'symbolic exchange, of which the gift is our most proximate illustration, the object is not an object: it is inseparable from the concrete relation in which it is exchanged, the transferential pact that it seals between two persons'.[12]

However, while Baudrillard claims that the gift object has 'neither use value nor (economic) exchange value', I would contend that, in terms of a wedding ring, it is in fact invested with the latter.[13] It may not be a physical representation of exchange value – money for products – but it does become an economic exchange of sorts. For example, in *Pilgrimage* Harriett, the wearer of the ring, is guaranteed financial security by her husband Gerald, and in return Gerald is provided with a wife and a mother for his children. In the same way, Sarah finds security in her marriage with Bennett as she 'need never worry any more' and, equally, Bennett is supplied with Sarah who will take 'over the management of the new house

[9] Shirley M. Ogletree, 'With this Ring, I Thee Wed: Relating Gender Roles and Love Styles to Attitudes towards Engagement Rings and Weddings', *Gender Issues*, 27, 1/2 (2010): 68.
[10] See Ogletree, p.69.
[11] Jean Baudrilliard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis: Telos Press, 1981), p.63.
[12] Ibid, p.64.
[13] Ibid.

and the new practice and the new practitioner' (I 341). The ring may not be a concrete commodity (other than in its purchase) in the exchange of the gift but, as Baudrillard has it, 'the definition of an object of consumption is entirely independent of objects themselves and *exclusively a function of the logic of significations*'.[14] What significations the wedding ring holds and what it comes to symbolise does indeed have exchange value. On the subject of wedding rings, Baudrillard argues:

> *The wedding ring*: This is a unique object, symbol of the relationship of the couple. One would neither think of changing it (barring mishap) nor of wearing several. The symbolic object is made to last and to witness in its duration the permanence of the relationship. Fashion plays as negligible a role at the strictly symbolic level as at the level of pure instrumentality.[15]

There is a clear distinction between the 'wedding ring' and the 'ordinary ring'; the former is not a commodity as is an ordinary ring, being only 'a personal gratification, in the eyes of others'.[16] However, what the wedding ring symbolises can be seen as a commodification of the relationship, or as representative of the exchange value of this relationship: it is indicative of social standing and as an object it confers status in the eyes of others. By wearing a ring one is taking on a 'role' – a fiancée, a wife – it becomes an integral part of the costume the performance requires.

This performance is evident in *Pilgrimage*. While Miriam is able to enjoy the 'show' of the engagement ring – 'Your ring is simply dazzling like that, Harry. D' you see? It's the sun' (I 202) – and is aware that by wearing this ring Harriett has certainly 'achieved', it also begins to symbolise the tethering Miriam associates with marriage. Gender roles are significant here: if Miriam is searching for a more egalitarian relationship then it is understandable that she would turn away from marriage and its associated adornments, implicitly for the reasons given by Ogletree: it is 'an establishment

[14] Ibid, p.67.
[15] Ibid, p.66.
[16] Ibid.

that has long been associated with patriarchal relationships and heterosexism'.[17] But if, like Harriett, one wanted a more traditional gendered role then one would turn towards such an institution and want all that it entails. While Miriam does often consider the idea of love, when it comes to marriage it does not seem to be her primary concern: financial security is the only advantage she can see. She sees Harriett's change in status, a change of identity, as she moves towards a more domestic life: 'Harriett's ringed fingers had finished dipping and drying the blue and white tea-service'; 'The fourth cup of creamy tea; Harriett's firm ringed hand' (I 293; II 226). Often adjacent to a domestic chore, Harriett's rings become a defining factor in her appearance and, therefore, her position in society. But, because Miriam lacks the traditional social motivations (conformity with social norms, etc.) of others she is unable to 'play this part' successfully.

Miriam's Suitors

At what is probably (although this is never stated) her coming out party in *Backwater*, Miriam has the opportunity to 'perform' the role of a romantic lead. She is waiting for the arrival of her potential beau, Ted. Her fear of Ted not attending, which Miriam reads as an indication of her problematic position in the marriage market, brings about all her telltale signs of uneasiness: she becomes cold, her 'muscles were somehow stiffening' (I 216), and her thoughts turn to the negative. His lateness and the thought of her being potentially 'stood up', leads her to consider other successful couples, namely Harriett and Gerald:

> Presently she would be cold and sick and done for, for the evening. She played on, harking back to the memory of the kindly challenge in the eyes of her brother-in-law to be, dancing gravely with a grave Harriett—fearing her … writing in her album:
>
> She was his life,
> The ocean to the river of his thoughts—
> Which terminated all.

[17] Ogletree, p.68.

… cold, calm little Harriett. (I 217)[18]

While on the one hand her estimation of the couple is that Gerald is lovingly consumed by his romance with Harriett, on the other hand it is its all-consuming nature that Miriam views as stifling and finite. It does not allow for more, it starts and concludes with them – it 'terminates all'. The words chosen are not joyful, they are sensible and serious: 'challenge', 'grave', 'fear', 'cold' and 'calm' – this certainly does not give the impression of a young couple in love but reflects Miriam's misgivings about marriage.

Finally, Ted arrives at the dance. Ted, about whom Miriam 'had shown Mademoiselle the names in her birthday-book and dwelt on one page and let Mademoiselle understand that it was *the* page – brown eyes – *les yeux bruns foncés*' (I 182). Ted, whose look had once 'lit up the whole world from end to end' (I 207), who makes her hands not large, cold and awkward as she usually feels, but 'heavy with happiness and quickened with the sense of [his] touch upon her arm' (I 218). Unfortunately, Miriam's conduct, her 'performance', with her potential suitor at this dance leaves much to be desired. The pair's tryst is quickly unstuck by Ted's own companion, Max Sonnenheim. Miriam is swept up by Max, an intriguingly 'strange man' (I 219) and the 'dear, dear' (I 220) Ted is unable to rival Max's exotic charm. Ted fails as a suitor to Miriam as Max, literally, waltzes her away from him.

Adopting an uncharacteristic role – one more similar to, say, the more flirtatious Nan Babington – Miriam coquettishly indulges Max during the dance. With a new sense of excitement she feels confident and bold with Max and uses him to assert her desirability before Ted: 'Once more from the strange security of his strongly swinging arms she would meet Ted's eyes, watching and waiting' (I 218). Miriam takes her 'sudden sense of daring' (I 218) further with Max as they wander the unlit and secluded garden. She becomes liberated in Max's company: she 'tasted a new sense of ease, walking slowly along with this strange man without "making conversation" […] Her mood expanded. He had come just at the

[18] The lines are from George Gordon Byron, 'The Dream' (1816).

right moment. She would keep him with her until she had to face Ted' (I 219). Encouraged by Miriam's manner, Max talks of 'treue Liebe' (true love) and makes the audacious move of physical touch by putting his arm around her shoulder:

> She walked on horrified, cradled, her elbow resting in her companion's hand as in a cup […] Ted was waiting somewhere in the night for her. Ted. Ted. Not this stranger. But why was Ted not bold like this? (I 220)

Shocked by the physicality of this unusually bold man, Miriam is, perhaps understandably, intrigued by his otherness, his decidedly non-Englishness. Rather than returning to Ted she continues to place herself in Max's hands, as if she were the 'cup' he held. Even Max's attire is illustrative of his otherness: 'his strange black-stitched glove holding her mittened hand. His arms steadied her' (I 221) and she finds both comfort and allurement as he takes hold of her hand. The strangeness of his 'black-stitched gloves' hold an appeal, he is something different, something Miriam has not experienced with men like Ted. Perhaps the 'strangeness' of Max's gloves forewarns of the potential danger of placing oneself in such gloved hands. Finally, upon re-entering the dance, she walks about the room with 'her hand on her partner's arm' (I 220), unaware of the 'togetherness' which is signalled by their touch. Unbeknown to her, Miriam's continued association with Max only adds to the guests' curious glances and the spectacle she is creating.

It is not just the hands of these two which offer insight into this interlude. Ted's hands also reflect his role and how he does not have a firm grasp of the romantic situation: 'Ted, ready to turn the music, his disengaged hand holding the bole of the tall palm. He dropped his hands and turned as they passed him, almost colliding with Miriam' (I 221). Presumably uninterested in turning the music sheets, he idly fondles the plant until Miriam comes into sight, only for him to become clumsy and unassertively drop his hands. He does manage to whisper 'Next dance with me' (I 221) but it is clear that by this point it is Max who is in control, as he once again whisks off Miriam into the garden. With Max, Miriam does not have to play the traditional compliant female role; she feels more

of an equal to him and his easiness and boldness allow her to be more assertive. However, this tryst does not last and they are disturbed by Ted who brings about quite a different feeling in Miriam. Her 'trembling hands' (I 224) indicate her uneasiness in her unpractised performance but, nonetheless, she continues flirtatiously to play the two friends off against each other, walking between them: 'She began to talk and laugh at random' and, worst of all for her, 'It excited her' (I 224).

Perhaps predictably, her performance does not work in her favour. Employing the dangerous tactic of inciting jealousy only results in Miriam losing both Max and Ted. Upon realising that Ted has left the party without a goodbye, Miriam finds 'herself in the presence of a tribunal' as her Mother, Sarah and Bennett obviously avoid discussing Ted's swift exit and she is left with the unsaid judgement of a 'group of conspirators' (I 225). Her thoughts afterwards are disjointed as she desperately realises the outcome of her actions: 'Ted gone away. Little Ted hurt and angry. To-morrow. Perhaps he wouldn't come. […] Terror seized her. She wouldn't see him. He had finished his work at the Institution. It was the big Norwich job next week' (I 224). She realises that by publicly placing herself in the hands of Max she has removed all potential romantic possibilities with Ted and taken herself out of this particular marital economy.

By performing a role which is not natural to her and employing devices she usually dislikes in women, Miriam believes that her flirting with Max would have 'brought Ted to his senses' (I 224). However in reality, the relatively meek Ted is unable to stand up to the 'foreign' competition and instead removes himself from the dance and from her, without a word. In Miriam's opinion, the blame does not lie solely with her, after all: 'Ted had failed. Ted belonged to the Rosa Nouchette Carey world. He would marry one of those women' (I 286). In doing this, he is no longer the endearing 'Little Ted', but placed in a category which is far removed from her and far from her ideal. Carey's work, including forty-one novels, is predominantly sentimental and almost completely 'feminine', dealing with the lives of women, the trials of work inside and outside the house, family and domestic issues.

Seen as 'appropriate', this gynocentric literature is clearly marketed towards middle-class girls and young women like Miriam. Jane Crisp comments: "'Wholesome" is the adjective that was most frequently applied to Rosa Nouchette Carey's own novels, "sound and wholesome" was the phrase used to sum up her oeuvre'.[19] This is a description Miriam would have applied to the German girls in *Pointed Roofs* but certainly not to herself: she is not 'wholesome' and therefore would not be suited to Ted. We know that Carey's work is read by Miriam and just prior to her comment linking Ted to Carey's world, she thinks of the meaning of Carey's novels and how 'it had seemed quite possible that life might suddenly develop into the thing the writer described':

> From somewhere would come an adoring man who believed in heaven and eternal life. One would grow very good; and after the excitement and interest had worn off one would go on, with firm happy lips being good and going to church and making happy matches for other girls or quietly disapproving of everybody who did not believe just in the same way and think about good girls and happy marriages and heaven; keeping such people outside. Smiling, wise and happy inside in the warm; growing older, but that did not matter because the adored man was growing older too.
>
> Now it had all changed. (I 283-4)

Indeed it has all changed. Miriam is now the person being kept 'outside' of Carey's idyllic world.[20]

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[19] Jane Crisp, 'Problematic pleasures: the position of women as writers, readers and film viewers' in Jane Crisp, Kay Ferres & Gillian Swanson, *Deciphering Culture: Ordinary Curiosities and Subjective Narratives*. (London: Routledge, 2000), p.98.

[20] Interestingly, reference to Carey's work appears again later in *The Tunnel* when Dr Hurd is telling his fellow diners how he likes to be read to by his sisters: "'A wonderful authoress, what's her name? Rosie… Newchet." He was just longing to know how it ended. Was it sweet and wonderful, or too dreadful for anything, to contemplate a student, a fully qualified doctor, having Rosa Nouchette Carey read to him by his sisters?' (II 388). This reiterates how Miriam associates Carey's work with 'wholesomeness' as is seen in this snippet of Hurd family life, but it also illustrates her uncertainty over how much she appreciates this quality in a person.

Performativity and the Marriage Market

The idea of performance becomes apparent again when all four sisters are talking about what men like to see women wear. In the endearing familial 'gossip' between sisters, Sarah's wisdom with men comes to the fore when they are discussing fashion choices:

> 'It is extraordinary about all those white dresses,' said Miriam […] 'Sarah says it's because men like them, […] I wonder if there's anything in it' […]
>
> 'Of course there is,' said Sarah, releasing the last strap of Eve's trunk.
>
> 'They'd *all* put on coloured things if it weren't for that.'
>
> 'Men tell them.'
>
> 'Do they?'
>
> 'The engaged men tell them – or brothers.' (I 300-1)

This reaffirms Miriam's concerns over the control held over women. Coming from a family of four girls, Miriam has never been subject to a brother's dictate so therefore has never been eased into this idea of submission. Miriam regards Sarah as the font of all knowledge about courtship and relationships, as she excitedly tells her other sisters: 'She says she knows why the Pooles look down and smirk […] that men admire them looking down like that' only to get the reply 'It's those kind of girls get on best' (I 301). Miriam's naivety is also apparent in her astonishment: 'Sarah says there are much more awful reasons. I can't think how she finds them out […] It's too utterly sickening somehow, for words' (I 301). Although Miriam has already, unsuccessfully, tried out a role worthy of the Pooles' 'smirk' with Ted and Max, it is in this discussion with her sisters that she is made aware of how she conducts herself in the marriage market. As Eve is only too happy to tell her:

> 'we're *all* different when there are men about to when we're by ourselves. We all make eyes, in a way.'
>
> 'Eve! What a perfectly beastly thing to say.'

> 'It isn't, my dear,' said Eve pensively. 'You should see yourself; *you* do.'
>
> 'Sally, *do* I?'
>
> 'Of course you do,' giggled Eve quietly, 'as much as anybody.'
>
> 'Then I'm the most crawling thing on the face of the earth,' thought Miriam, turning silently to the tree-tops looming softly just outside the window; 'and the worst of it is I only know it at moments now and again.' The tree-tops, serene with some happy secret, cast her off, and left her standing with groping crisping fingers unable to lift the misery that pressed upon her heart. (I 301-2)

Miriam's own complicity in this performance is brought to her attention and her hands reflect her uneasiness, especially as it is an act she so dislikes in other women. It is a familiar feature of Miriam's internal thoughts that she turns to the outside, to nature and the freedom it offers, but even the serene, all-knowing, tree-tops spurn her and she is left alone with unhappy, hardening fingers 'groping' their way. Her 'crisping' hands are also indicative of the hardening of her 'self' as she moves forward alone.

Continuing her development of self-awareness, Miriam's involvement with the engaged Harriett and Gerald, provides her with hitherto unknown insights into the mind and opinions of a man. On a holiday in Brighton, Miriam is quite shocked by Gerald's comments: 'Gerald said extraordinary, disturbing things about girls on the esplanade' (I 319). Having such an insight, however, makes her question how she is viewed by other men:

> is she, too, subject to 'disturbing' remarks? Were she and Eve also 'on show'; waiting to be given 'half an inch'; would she or Eve be 'perfectly awful in the dark'? Did the young men they favoured specially with their notice say things about them? (I 319).

Having involvement with those successful in the marriage market throws light onto her own undesirable situation and the difficulties that emerge from it. From this she becomes aware that

Eve and herself are now in the sexual market and are subject to men's estimation of their status 'in the dark'. While she is conscious of the potential pitfalls in such a marketplace there is also an inkling of the possibility of romantic enjoyment:

> She discovered that a single steady unexpected glance, meeting her own, from a man who had the right kind of bearing – something right about the set of shoulders – could disperse all the vague trouble she felt at the perpetual spectacle of the strolling crowds, the stiffly waiting many-eyed houses, the strange stupid bathing-machines, and send her gaily forward in a glad world where there was no need to be alone in order to be happy. (I 319)

Now aware of her place 'on show', her surroundings become a maelstrom of spectacles, performance and observation, yet receiving one reciprocated glance from a man of 'the right kind of bearing' can alleviate such angst. Naturally her own awakening sexuality begins to confuse her and problematises her previous steadfastness as she swings between despising a man to desiring him which only further complicates her position amongst 'the crowd'.

As was seen with her flirting with Max and the resulting failed relationship with Ted, Miriam is unable to play the part successfully so as to be a serious contender in the marketplace. While she intermittently desires a partner, she does not want to sacrifice herself completely. Indeed, the reconciliation of this conflicted position is a problem with which she continually battles: 'What was life? Either playing a part all the time in order to be amongst people in the warm, or standing alone with the strange true real feeling' (I 320).

The Alternative

As we have seen, Miriam has been exposed to the concept of marriage and her role within it as a young woman in need of security but, importantly, she has also been exposed to the alternative option: the 'Old Maid'. After her initial interview with

the Perne sisters in the North London school, Miriam discusses her impression of them with her mother.

> 'Don't you think they were awfully nice?'
> 'I do. They are very charming ladies.' […]
> 'D'you remember the little one saying all girls ought to marry? Why did she say that?'
> 'They are dear funny little O.M.'s,' said Mrs Henderson merrily. She was sitting with her knees crossed, the stuff of her brown canvas dress was dragged across them into an ugly fold by the weight of the velvet panel at the side of the skirt. She looked very small and resourceless. And there were the Pernes with their house and their school. They were old maids. Of course. What then? (I 193)

Mrs Henderson, as a married woman, is (kindly but condescendingly) able to laugh off their foibles as they are simply 'funny little O.M.'s'.[21] Two areas of note come from this encounter: first, the seemingly ridiculous thought (in Miriam's opinion) that all girls should marry and second, Miriam unconsciously estimates her mother's social standing in relation to the Pernes. Indeed her mother has 'achieved' in that she has a husband, children and a home but, as a consequence, she is left 'resourceless'. She is the one who is small, frail and in ill-fitting clothing which are past their best, whereas the Pernes have their own house, their own school, and a continual income of money: 'many very wealthy relatives and the very best kind of good clothes and good deal of strange old-fashioned jewellery' (I 275). And what has been sacrificed for all this? A husband. In Miriam's estimation, it seems a small price to pay for the security of holding your future in your own hands. But, as ever, economics are an important factor here. Miriam does not come from a wealthy family which can provide for her but, equally, as we see in Mrs

[21] This can be seen as an opinion mainly espoused by *married* women. A 1932 short story 'Old Maid' in *The Saturday Evening Post* reflects Mrs Henderson's sentiment: 'My mother had always told me that it was cruel to make fun of old maids. "Poor things, they can't help it," she said. "People ought to feel sorry for them"'. (Rose Wilder Lane, 'Old Maid', *Saturday Evening Post*, 23 July 1932, p.10). And the 'poor thing' who was subject of this concern? She was a teacher of but twenty-four, not a far stretch from Miriam's own position.

Henderson, having a husband does not necessarily secure one's finances.

While Fräulein Pfaff can be seen as a more austere example of the old maid, the Pernes, and Miss Haddie in particular, offer a softer and certainly more affluent version. Once again, the depictions of their hands come to represent Miriam's estimation of them. Her first observation tells: 'They were all three dressed in thin fine black material and had tiny hands' (I 190). Their tiny hands illustrate their lady-like status and their black apparel signals that they are women who work.[22] There are repeated depictions of the hands of the three sisters, showing them to be kind but equally showing them to be 'past their best'. The descriptions are littered with adjectives such as 'thin' and 'frail' although nevertheless comforting, for example when Miss Haddie 'held one of her hands in two small welcoming ones' (I 264). Miss Haddie, though the youngest of the three sisters by far, at the mere age of thirty-five is seen as old, frail with grey hair and 'old-fashioned' views. She is already deemed an old maid with no hope of marriage and clearly past her prime: 'Miss Haddie's thin fingers feeling for the pins in her black toque. "Of course not," she thought, looking at the unveiled shrivelled cheek. … "thirty-five years of being a lady"' (I 257). At this age Miss Haddie is already out of the marriage market as the conventions of the time dictate that most young women will be contemplating engagements at the age of seventeen.[23] Although some, more generous, authors of etiquette such as G.R.M. Devereux, do consider a later marriage more favourable, thinking 'a girl of two – or three-and-twenty and a man of twenty-eight or thirty are my ideal of a suitably matched couple'.[24] But, at either seventeen or twenty-three, this idea highlights Miriam's quickly diminishing position in the marriage market, as at the age of

[22] In the continuous circular reading that *Pilgrimage* invites, it is not a far leap to make the connection between the black outfits of the three Perne sisters and the black outfits which Miriam is required to don later when she is working in Wimpole Street, after all: 'the woman in black works' (II 223).
[23] Florence Hartley, *The Ladies' Book of Etiquette and Manual of Politeness* (Boston: G.W. Cottrell, 1860), p.245.
[24] G.R.M. Devereux, *The Etiquette of Engagement and Marriage* (London: C. Arthur Pearson, 1903), p.41.

eighteen (or twenty when Harriett and Sarah marry) she is either already too old or certainly in need of a husband post-haste.

The Weddings, the End?

As *Honeycomb*, the third chapter-volume of *Pilgrimage*, draws to a close we reach the weddings of Harriett and Sarah, a rite of passage in which Miriam plays a subordinate role. The wedding day brings with it both excitement and fear for Miriam. Performing her duties as bridesmaid, it is Miriam who figuratively takes hold of Harriett's former life, 'taking the long glove smooth and warm from Harriett's hand' (I 461-2). By holding this glove she symbolically frees Harriett's hand ready to receive the wedding ring and all that it entails.

At the reception, Miriam makes an attempt to regain a sense of the happiness of the childhood they had shared:

> Harriett turned a scorched cheek and a dilated unseeing eye. Their hands dropped and met. Miriam felt the quivering of firm, strong fingers and the warm metal of the rings. She grasped the matronly hand with the whole strength of her own. Harriett must remember … all this wedding was nothing. …She was Harriett. […] she must remember all the years of being together, years of nights side by side … nights turning to day for both of them, at the same moment. She gave her hand a little shake. (I 463)

Harriett, however, has already changed and is starting to move away from Miriam; her 'unseeing eye' no longer registers Miriam in the same way and the depiction of her hands illustrates her distance. The 'warm metal' of the binding rings imbues Harriett with strength in her 'matronly' hands which Miriam can only attempt to match with all her strength, but it also represents a physical and metaphorical barrier between the wed and unwed sisters. Miriam is keen remind Harriett of their times together, making her aware that she is more than merely a wife. Miriam does so gesturally, with 'a little shake' of the hand; but it is not long

before Gerald arrives – 'Harriett welcomed it' (I 463) – and she is no longer solely Miriam's.

The divide between the married and the unmarried Henderson sisters is all too apparent: 'the voices of Sarah and Harriett would go on … marked with fresh things. … Her own and Eve's would remain, separate, to grow broken and false and unrecognisable in the awful struggle for money' (I 464). Again Miriam is, perhaps cynically, unable to separate marriage from a financial arrangement which, to her, seems to be the only advantage it offers. Though Miriam may have auditioned for the role of the romantic lead with Ted and Max, her search for her 'real' self does not include marriage: 'To hold back and keep free … and real. Impossible to be real unless you were quite free. … Two married in one family was enough. Eve would marry, too. But money' (I 459). Aside from financial security, like Durkheim, Miriam considers that in marriage 'There is no compensation or relief for the woman'.[25] Reluctant to act out the performance involved in securing a husband, Miriam wants to be free from these traditional expectations but time and again she comes back to her economic estimation of marriage – how will she ever achieve real freedom if she is not financially secure? However, as Pilar Hidalgo argues, it is for this very reason that she is able to obtain freedom:

> her leisure and her combination of involvement and non-involvement (both characteristics of the flâneur) hinge on gender. For one thing, her leisure depends on *her not being married*, on her mother being dead, and on her resisting the emotional demands made on her by other women.[26]

Without the traditional restraints of marriage, Miriam is able to move freely between groups, social circles and locations. All her early concerns over not being married and financially secure are, in fact, those very things which enable her to become the independent and 'real' woman she strives to be.

[25] Durkheim, p.272.
[26] Pilar Hidalgo, 'Female Flânerie in Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*' , *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, 6 (1993): 95 (my emphasis).

As this article highlights, an examination of hands and their adornments can offer insight into the characters and their situation in or out of the marriage market. *Pilgrimage* does not offer us any traditional romance plots. Indeed, Miriam says herself:

> If Rosa Nouchette Carey knew me, she'd make me one of the bad characters who are turned out of the happy homes. I'm some sort of bad unsimple woman. Oh, damn, damn, she sighed. I don't know. Her hands seemed to mock her, barring her way. (I 284)

Although Miriam's hands appear to hinder her at this time, it is those 'bad, unsimple' hands which are later able to take hold of her own future – without the need of any adornment. Through Miriam's development in the early novel-chapters of Pilgrimage, Richardson develops a critique of conventional models of marriage, juxtaposing the performativity required to take part in the marriage market with the alternative life choices available to women of the time. The heteronormativity of these options are clearly questioned throughout. As Jennifer Cooke argues: 'The female lifespan in the world Miriam inhabits – grow up, get married, have children, grow old, die – is a heteronormative model which she rejects, at first through financial necessity and later through conscious choice and the exercise of hard-won autonomy'.[27] The first three chapter-volumes of *Pilgrimage* offer the embryonic stages of Miriam's development. It is in later chapter-volumes that Richardson's critique moves on and sees Miriam developing and honing a new feminist perspective which allows her to find fulfilment outside the traditional bonds of matrimony and, importantly, avoid being relegated to the status of an old maid. Although initially disconcerted by how her married sisters have changed, Miriam returns to her pragmatic approach: 'Sarah and Harriett, rescued from poverty and fear' (I 462). Yet it is a position she cannot envision for herself. The weddings certainly signal the end of the Henderson sisters' sorority and a move forward to the future – for better or worse.

[27] Jennifer Cooke, 'Dorothy Richardson, Queer Theorist', *Pilgrimages: The Journal of Dorothy Richardson Studies*, 4 (2012): 23.