

# Marriage

Published in 1923, just a year after the appearance of *Ulysses* and *The Waste Land*, Marianne Moore's "Marriage" is a landmark of High Modernism and one of her most ambitious and important works. "Marriage" is a long, complicated collage of statements and quotations regarding the institution of marriage and its problems as well as a critical exploration of gender roles and the relations between men and women. This remarkable masterpiece stands apart from the rest of Moore's work for several reasons: it is her longest and one of her most difficult, experimental works; it is perhaps her most openly feminist poem in its critique of marriage and patriarchy; and with its contradictory attitudes, it is also among her most ambivalent and complex. Critics have argued that the persona that accrued around Moore—the reserved, prim, asexual spinster writer of elegant and moralistic poems—has often obscured the radical energy of her poetry, perhaps best exemplified by this aesthetically and politically subversive poem. In an important essay Moore's friend William Carlos Williams astutely highlighted the poem's kaleidoscopic quality, praising its "rapidity of movement" and calling the poem an "anthology of

*transit*" (Tomlinson, 1969). "There is nothing missing," Williams avowed, "but the connectives." With its jagged discontinuities, sustained indeterminacy, and its iconoclasm, "Marriage" is a classic and influential Modernist poem.

It may seem strange that Moore, who never married, lived most of her life with her mother, and was famously reticent about her personal life, would write a highly regarded poem about marriage and gender dynamics, but in actuality Moore was extremely interested in and troubled by the subject. Keenly aware of the overwhelming societal pressure to marry, especially for young women like herself, Moore remained skeptical of sacrificing her fiercely held independence to any permanent union. She feared that marriage artificially binds two complex, changing, and often incompatible beings into a false and impossible unity. Furthermore, because of the power dynamics in a patriarchal society, Moore felt that such a bond can severely constrain a woman's potential, particularly if the woman is a free thinking, creative artist.

Critics have noted that several crucial events in Moore's life caused the subject of matrimony to be personally vexing to her and helped spark the composition of "Marriage." First, her brother married against their mother's wishes, which unsettled the extremely close-knit family; second, it was rumored that Scofield Thayer, the editor of the literary journal *The Dial*, courted and proposed to Moore only to be rejected; and finally, there was the sudden, shocking marriage of her close friend, the writer and wealthy heiress Bryher (Winifred Ellerman). Much to the surprise of the New York avant-garde, Bryher, who was the lover of Moore's dear friend, the poet H.D. (Hilda Doolittle), married the struggling bohemian writer Robert McAlmon in 1921. Suspicious of McAlmon's intentions and the marriage's seriousness, fearful of its impact on her friend's creativity and freedom, Moore was utterly baffled by the entire situation, which she called "an earthquake," wondering why her friend would submit to an arrangement so threatening to her writing and her liberty (Stapleton, 1978).

The strong emotions and philosophical and cultural questions provoked by these events stimulated Moore's poem. Early in 1922 she began the long process of composing this poem in her notebook by jotting under the heading "Marriage": "I don't know what Adam and Eve think of it by this time / I don't think much of it" (Keller and Miller, 1987). Although the finished poem, which appeared as a chapbook in 1923, refers to marriage as something "requiring all one's criminal ingenuity / to avoid!" it is far from resolved in its attitudes about the matter. In fact, with its shifting viewpoints and contradictions, the poem is a study of uncertainty and ambivalence, as it carries on a protracted internal argument. Rather than giving any definitive answer about marriage, Moore explores this strange phenomenon from a dizzying variety of perspectives, fully aware that no single or simple explanation can accommodate something so complex: "Psychology which explains everything," she writes near the beginning, "explains nothing, / and we are still in doubt." Indeed, the pervasive enigma of romantic relationships and marriage is a major theme of the poem, and the final movement begins with the acknowledgment that "Everything to do with love is mystery."

From the beginning "this institution, / perhaps one should say enterprise," is both celebrated—"this fire-gilt steel / alive with goldenness; how bright it shows"—and critiqued:

Unhelpful Hymen!  
a kind of overgrown cupid  
reduced to insignificance  
by the mechanical advertising  
parading as involuntary comment.

Moore presents marriage as an intractable paradox: "this amalgamation which can never be more / than an interesting impossibility" is alternately a situation in which two people who wish to be alone decide to "be alone together," a "strange paradise," "a very trivial object indeed," and a "rare . . . striking grasp of opposites."

Moore quickly introduces two opposed archetypal beings, Eve and Adam, who dominate the poem and serve as vehicles for her ironic commentary on the battle of the sexes. Both are portrayed with a mixture of positive and negative terms: they are beautiful yet flawed, "alive with words" yet thoroughly narcissistic. At the center of the poem is a heated dialogue between this generic "He" and "She," a vicious conversation that highlights the strife between the genders, in which Moore clearly critiques male domination and misogyny:

She says, "Men are monopolists  
of 'stars, garters, buttons  
and other shining baubles'—  
unfit to be the guardians  
of another person's happiness.'  
He says, . . . you will find that  
'a wife is a coffin,'  
that severe object  
with the pleasing geometry  
stipulating space not people,  
refusing to be buried  
and uniquely disappointing.

Despite the irresolution and multiplicity of the poem, at its heart lies Moore's understated yet chilling observation that

experience attests  
that men have power  
and sometimes one is made to feel it.

This capacious, challenging poem erupted out of Moore's turbulent attitudes about the conflict between "liberty" and "union" and the seemingly irreconcilable nature of independence and marriage. Innovative in its use of collage and ellipsis, groundbreaking in its feminist cultural critique and its inclusion of so many perspectives and types of discourse, "Marriage" surely stands among the masterpieces of 20th-century American poetry.

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### Further Reading

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