“Not For Money, But Where Money Is”

Marriage, Choice and Constraint in Frances Brooke’s The History of Emily Montague

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Like many other professional women writers who emerged during eighteenth-century England, Frances Brooke (1724-1789) was a versatile author who expressed herself in a variety of genres. She began as a journalist and editor of the weekly paper The Old Maid, which ran for thirty-seven issues in 1755 and 1756; she wrote four novels, The History of Lady Julia Mandeville (1763), The History of Emily Montague (1769), The Excursion (1777) and The History of Charles Mandeville (1790); she published two tragedies, Virginia (with “Odes, Pastorals and Translations”, 1756) and The Siege of Sinope (1781); she had great success with two comic operas, Rosina (1783) and Marian (1788), and she translated several works from the French: Marie-Jeanne Riccoboni’s Letters from Lady Juliet Catesby (1760), Nicolas-Étienne Framéry’s Memoirs of the Marquis de St. Forlaix (1770) and Abbé C.F.X. Millot’s Elements of the History of England (1771). She was “a recognized, if also marginal, figure in London literary society both before and after her sojourn in Canada” (Benedict, 7-8). Her literary circle included Charles and Fanny Burney, Samuel Johnson, Hannah More, Elizabeth Griffith, Anna Seward and David Garrick.

Frances Brooke married an Anglican minister who was commissioned as chaplain to the British garrison in Quebec after the city had surren-
dered to the English (1759). In 1763, Brooke, accompanied by her two children, made the journey across the Atlantic and was reunited with her husband. It was during her four-year sojourn in Canada that Brooke began work on *The History of Emily Montague*, eventually published in London in 1769.

Set for the most part in Canada in the Montreal-Quebec-Sillery area among British army officers, *The History of Emily Montague* is an epistolary novel about the courtship and marriage of three young couples, one of which resides in London and the other two in Canada. Ed Rivers, the novel’s protagonist and chief correspondent, can obtain some British North American land as a colonel-lieutenant on half pay and has aspirations for an improved financial situation. In Canada, Ed is reunited with old English acquaintances, the coquettish Arabella Fermor and her future husband Captain John Fitzgerald; he also meets Emily Montague, and almost immediately falls in love with her. Emily is engaged to a British baronet, Sir George Clayton, since her uncle, in charge of her upbringing, has taken, “the first opportunity of marrying [her] to advantage”2. In the meantime, Ed’s sister and his friend, Lucy and rakish John Temple, who correspond from London, fall in love and get married.

Many of the novel’s letters, particularly those written by the father of Arabella Fermor to an anonymous British Earl of --- are steeped in political considerations having to do with the aftermath of the British conquest, the French seigneurial system, the social organization of the Natives and the future of the colony. Other letters are replete with accurate geographical details; many describe the summer rambles and the trips of the novel’s young couples who travel between Montreal and Quebec, and take sleigh-rides through the snow and the ice of a Canadian winter. The story ends with the return of the Canadian couples to England where Ed and Emily are finally married and make their home.

*The History of Emily Montague* has been appropriated by critics of Canadian literature as “the first Canadian novel” and these critics have been its most steady and prolific students3. They argue that the novel anticipates some of the main concerns of Canadian literature, like the French-English conflict, the encounter with the wilderness, or the tension between nature and society. It is equally valid to read the novel as a product of the eighteenth-century British literary tradition. The novel’s epistolary form, its references to classical literature and to the French *philosophes* (mostly
Rousseau and Voltaire), the presence of character-types like the coquette, the rake and the man of sensibility, its bourgeois reaction to aristocratic values, the novel’s English aversion to things Gallic, the conflict between country and city life, courtship and marriage, all bespeak eighteenth-century English literary culture and tradition.

_The History of Emily Montague_ expresses the tensions within the new bourgeois ethos of familial arrangement and domestic happiness. On one level it advocates agency for both the members of wedlock as well as a union based on reciprocal love instead of income; this representation of marriage is what historian Lawrence Stone describes as a “companionate” union founded on equality and love, free from parental interference and economic interests. From this point of view, Brooke’s text has been read as a feminist tract which advances women’s emancipation. At the same time, however, the novel evidences a marked preoccupation with rigid gender distinctions. If it champions equality it also instates the hegemonic role of the male subject and a hierarchy of power relations that reinforce feminine stereotypes and limit women’s independence. Finally, the novel’s idealism both masks and represses the traditional partnership between marriage and money, and locates financial gain and love in the same relation.

“There has perhaps been no period when Marriage was more a general topic of conversation than at present”, James Boswell wrote in 1781 (quoted in Boone 58). The issue of marriage, so central to Brooke’s novel, is part of a general interest and debate that in England began at the end of the seventeenth century and that went on throughout the 18th century. The basis on which a couple united in marriage and the re-arrangement of the traditional household was provoked by a series of complex factors: the expansion of the capitalist economic system, the separation of commodity production from domestic labour, the articulation of the middle-class man as a public person and the middle-class woman as a private and domestic figure. At the same time, the possibility of love marriages and a belief in the free choice of the partners were roused by Enlightened notions of personal autonomy and the inalienable right to happiness. The issue of “free choice” versus “arranged marriage” produced a large number of pamphlets, treatises, articles and books. Periodicals such as _The London Magazine_ (from which Boswell’s passage is taken), _The Spectator_, writers as diverse as Mary Astell, Jonathan Swift, Daniel Defoe, Wettenhall Wilkes
and Mary Wollstonecraft were all concerned about the distinctions between a marriage based on interest and one based on love⁴.

By the second half of the century in England, according to Stone, "companionate marriage" was a "clear trend" (219). It placed reciprocal attraction between men and women before the economic status of the couple. Companionate marriage was based on an equality of age and social class and was free from decisions taken by parents. The need for companionship in marriage had replaced the "strict wifely subjection and obedience" of earlier centuries and "equality" was now the catchword in matters of wedlock (217). It was advantageous to women and meant "a greater sense of equality and sharing", and "a decline in the near-absolute authority of the husband over the wife among the propertied classes" (219-25).

Stone’s interpretation of companionate marriage is corroborated by historian Randolph Trumbach in whose view the new eighteenth-century domesticity produced a "partial egalitarianism in familial relations", especially among the richer classes; Trumbach claims that in England during the eighteenth century patriarchy was replaced by a domesticity "based on the friendship of husband and wife, and friendship, as ... feminist writers said, exists only between equals" (122-23).

Marriage and the rituals of courtship are among the main concerns of the protagonists throughout the 228 letters that comprise *The History of Emily Montague*. But it is Ed Rivers with his typical conduct-book advice, whose letters are preoccupied with the subject. Ed regards marriage as a "second species of friendship" (59); it is a union between equals based on the free choice of partners. Ed is strongly adverse to parental interference because, as he writes to Captain Fitzgerald, "the only equality to which parents in general attend, is that of fortune" (371).

Ed contrasts his opinions in matters of marriage to those of Madame de Maintenon who writes to the Dutchess of Burgundy that, "[husbands] are naturally tyrannical, ... masters, [and women] have only to suffer and obey with good grace" (204)⁵. He takes pride in rejecting her views as undemocratic and outmoded, and against them posits his own more progressive conception of equality within marriage as ethically and spiritually superior:

Equality is the soul of friendship: marriage, to give delight, must join two minds, not devote a slave to the will of an imperious lord; whatever conveys the idea of
subjection necessarily destroys that of love, of which I am so convinced, that I have always wished the word OBEY expunged from the marriage ceremony. (205)

Several literary critics, mostly grounding their readings on Ed’s ideas of marriage and his sensitivity towards women, have argued that The History of Emily Montague is an early feminist work. Ann Edwards Boutelle makes a case for Brooke’s radicalism and affirms that “Brooke argues forcefully for a marriage-ideal, a partnership based on balance, spontaneity, and equality” (8). Boutelle also writes: “That a male character should be advocating the omission of the word ‘obey’ from the marriage vows in 1769 is indicative of the sweeping radicalism of Brooke’s position” (9). Boutelle is not the only scholar to foreground Brooke’s feminism and her revolutionary notion of democratic partnership. Katharine M. Rogers reads Ed Rivers as a particularly enlightened man, because, “he not only loves women but respects them as independent beings; he sees them as people rather than sexual objects and even notices that they are unjustly treated under the law” (162). Jane Sellwood, has argued that Brooke’s novel, “empower[s] the voice of the female position” (61) and that “Ed’s feminised sensibility ... posit[s] freer roles for women in eighteenth-century society” (65)6.

Some scholars have already noticed the risks and ambiguities implied in companionate marriage and the new eighteenth-century ideals of domesticity. In her study on married women’s property – dower, jointure, pin money and separate maintenance allowances – Susan Staves has argued that eighteenth-century ideological formulations of families legitimated the subordination of women on “new, more sentimental grounds”. A new concept of femininity within the nuclear family was propagated by a glut of advice books, domestic novels and dramas, magazines and newspapers (222). Within the family women were increasingly seen as the guardians of Protestant religious values, of compassion and charity; sentimentality became associated with feminine gentility, emotion, frailty, motherhood, childrearing. In this formulation of femininity and family, domesticity and wifehood became a profession which reinforced the separation between the public and private sphere; they limited the roles that women could take up in the culture, and even within the domestic sphere constructed them as delicate and dependent.

Staves criticizes Stone’s and Trumbach’s liberal analysis of
“companionate marriage” and “domesticity”, respectively, and charges the two historians with accepting “the very ideological formulation created by eighteenth-century advocates of domesticity” (223). In her view, they focus upon changes to women’s legal and public position, but fail to see the real ways in which women’s role within the home, family and domestic sphere exacerbated their private oppression in the way mentioned above. For Staves, the “rhetoric of free choice” made an eighteenth-century woman, “more psychologically dependent on her relationship with her husband” (224).

Brooke’s novel has not yet generated sufficient discussion of what it represents an affirmation of egalitarian relations between the spouses and, on the other hand, the extent to which it strengthens the hierarchy of power between husband and wife that limits women’s independence and intensifies their passivity. The novel’s discussion of the paradigm of free choice versus role restriction found in Ed’s letters is not a simple celebration of women’s equality in conjugal relationships. Ed advocates equality in marriage, but still considers women “creatures placed by Providence under [men’s] protection, and depend[ent] on [men] for their happiness” (207). In Ed’s opinion, this subordination is evidence of, “the strongest possible tie of affection to a well-turned mind”. Ed sets up a strict model of female behaviour along moral and sexual lines and he naturalizes women’s constancy. To Captain Fitzgerald he writes, “they are both by nature and education more constant, and scarce ever change the object of their affections”. It is on the basis of this idea of feminine constancy that Ed advises his friend and brother-in-law John Temple:

make [Lucy] the confidente, and the only confidente, of your gallantries, if you are so unhappy as to be inadvertently betrayed into any; her heart will possibly be at first a little wounded by the confession, but this proof of perfect esteem will increase her friendship for you; she will regard your error with compassion and indulgence, and lead you gently back by her endearing tenderness to honor and herself. (207)

Men’s extra-marital relations euphemistically phrased as “gallantries” are accepted; it is even possible to commit them “inadvertently”. Women are seen as devoted caretakers, forgiving shepherds who will transform the profligate men into models of virtue; it follows that they are also the ones
to blame if their husbands’ conduct is morally reprehensible. Women’s compassion, indulgence and tenderness become the hallmark of feminine sensibility for Ed and reinforce those stereotypes of feminine delicacy typical of the sentimentalization of women’s role which occurred in England during the eighteenth century.

Ed’s letters describe his fascination with Emily’s “tenderness, sensibility, modesty and truth”, which “adorn her almost with rays of divinity” (341). In a missive to Captain Fitzgerald he writes, “my heart was captivated by that bewitching languor, that seducing softness, that melting sensibility, in the air of my sweet Emily” (318). The epistles of Emily suggest she is as Ed describes her; to him she writes: “when you appeared, my heart beat, I blushed, I turned pale by turns, my eyes assumed a new softness, I trembled, and every pulse confessed the master of my soul” (327); her letters talk generally of “the modesty, the blushing delicacy of my sex” (332).

This idealization of women and the emphasis put on a wife’s delicacy are a consequence of the rise of the middle class and its cultural awakening during the eighteenth century in England. Writes Joseph Boone:

To a great extent the insecurities bred of the bourgeoisie’s sense of having just “arrived” created their desire for a more civilized and refined existence; companionate marriage became a fashionable vehicle by which a husband could advertise his successful achievement of a domestic kingdom presided over by that most visible sign of status, a delicate, “ladylike” wife. (60)

In Brooke’s novel, Ed wants a domestic kingdom and just such a wife. Throughout his letters he reiterates his ideal of domestic bliss: “the pure delights of peaceful domestic life, the calm social evening hour, the circle of friends, the prattling offspring, and the tender impassioned smile of real love” (178). Ed aspires to the life of a country gentleman with a small plot of land to farm and Emily at his side to support him, superintend the dairy and tend the flowers and vegetables (313). Once his dream becomes a reality, he can proudly write to Captain Fitzgerald: “Emily is planning a thousand embellishments for the garden, and will next year make it a wilderness of sweets, a paradise worthy its lovely inhabitant” (342).

At work in Ed Rivers’s idealization of women and companionate marriage is what Joseph Boone calls “the double message – equal but not
equal” (60). His benevolent paternalism does not change power relations within the married couple but conveys a double message which, as Boone has noticed (drawing on Louis Althusser), mirrors “the process by which social ideology attempts to repress, while actually revealing, the contradictions that constitute its appearance of unity and equity” (60).

Arabella Fermor, the other main correspondent of The History of Emily Montague and named after the woman who was the model for Alexander Popes's Belinda in The Rape of the Lock (1712), is also regarded as a character who endorses a liberating position for women. Arabella, or Bell as she is often called, is the coquettish, flirtatious and humorous character of the novel; a much more memorable character than the shadowy and languid Emily Montague who gives the title to Brooke's novel. Because of Bell's irony, witticism and independence of opinions, according to Jane Sellwood, her letters “point both to a deliberate play on conventions of feminine sensibility and subversion of them” (64) and, therefore, “empower the position of the female within conventionally male-ordered realms of their eighteenth-century societies” (60). Arabella's independence is unconventional within eighteenth-century codes of sensibility. She, nevertheless, flirts and plays the coquette in the service of one goal: to marry. Bell is the perfect recipient of those novels, dramas, and pamphlets that were copiously published during the eighteenth century; works which, within the bourgeois ideology of domesticity, taught young women how to conquer husbands, idealized their roles within the family and limited their activity outside the domestic sphere. Arabella says “I have no notion of a paradise without an Adam” (347); she has no horizon other than within conjugal relations and all her charms and power within courtship are directed toward getting married.

Ruth Perry has pointed out how in an age that valued marriage and domesticity as the ultimate goal, women “began to make better use of [their] ‘charms’ as bait to catch husband[s]” (50). Evidence included the increased use of cosmetics, perfumes and oils by the end of the seventeenth century; during the eighteenth century women used facial make up and paid attention to clothes and fashion like they had never done in previous historical periods – fashion became a current issue discussed in papers like the Spectator, Tatler and Guardian (Perry, 50-51). Arabella’s flirtatious manners are part of this logic of seduction which is always in service of marriage. Her coquetries function as revitalizers of a possible
conjugal boredom: “we seem in great danger of sinking into vegetation ... What must we do, my dear, to vary our days?” she writes in her last letter, before being interrupted, as she says, “by a divine colonel in the guards” (406). Even if the final allusion to “the divine colonel” is evidence of Arabella’s indomitable coquetry and implies an independence of spirit not subdued by her marriage, she dreams of future domestic bliss with Captain Fitzgerald:

I sometimes fancy to myself Fitzgerald and I loving on, from the impassioned hour when I first honored him with my hand, to that tranquil one, when we shall take our afternoon’s nap vis à vis in two arm chairs, by the fire-side, he a grave country justice, and I his worship’s good sort of a wife, the Lady Bountiful of the parish. (384)

Arabella’s ideas of domesticity are, in fact, very similar to Ed’s. Like him she can imagine women only within the household and within “companionate marriage”, which, despite its egalitarian façade entraps women as completely as arranged marriage.

The trademark of companionate marriage, apart from equality, is love. It is regarded as the only real justification for marriage by all the young protagonists in The History of Emily Montague. The ethos of love in the eighteenth century was an innovation in the history of wedlock. Twelfth-century courtly love never ended in marriage and as Leslie Fiedler has written: “to Augustine or Dante, Sophocles or Plato, to the author of Beowulf or of the Chanson de Roland, the tag ‘they lived happily ever after’ would by no means have had the meaning it has for us” (11); or, one might add, the meaning it had for the eighteenth century when love marriages became a possibility and the mark of a true union between lovers. Ruth Perry has noticed that “the history of marriage arranged for practical reasons was longer than those arranged for love”, but by the end of the seventeenth century, “love had become a radical reason for marriage” (57-8).

All of the young protagonists in The History of Emily Montague are against marriages that are arranged for economic reasons. Ed is, once again, the most convinced proponent of romantic marriage. Just as his notion of equality is fraught with tension and contradictions, his notion of romantic marriage betrays eighteenth-century bourgeois culture. Ed is the first one to understand that the rich Sir George Clayton, chosen by Emily’s
uncle, is not the right person for the sensitive Emily: “his feelings are dull, nothing makes the least impression on him”, he writes to his sister (51). On the other hand, Emily is quick to realize whom she really loves: “the first moment I saw Colonel Rivers convinced me my heart had till then been a stranger to true tenderness” (142). Ed reiterates in his letters that love, and not money, is the foundation of his relationship to Emily and that this should be the case in all marital relations. He writes to Emily:

Fortune has no power over minds like ours; we possess a treasure to which all she has to give is nothing, the dear exquisite delight of loving, and of being beloved. (264)

However, for a person who idealistically believes in marriage based on love, Ed is curiously concerned with the money he hopes to make from the land he buys in Canada: “I cannot live in England on my present income, though it enables me to live en prince in Canada” (83). Ed continually alludes to the fact that his fortune is not suitable to Emily’s future: “I cannot bear my Emily, after refusing a coach and six, should live without an equipage suitable at least to her birth” (154). He counts his income and Emily’s dowry to the last pound: “I have nothing that I can call my own, but my half-pay and four thousand pounds ... I never asked about Emily’s fortune; but I know it is a small one; perhaps two thousand dollars” (297-98). In his relation to Emily Ed is preoccupied with social and economic matters that his idealism would have us overlook.

As Bridget Hill points out, “one thing all marriages in the eighteenth century had in common was close links with the economic circumstances of the couple concerned” (174). Ed and Emily’s companionate marriage is not an exception. It is an example of the middle-class ethics summed up by Matthew Boulton’s phrase: “Don’t marry for money, but marry where money is” (quoted by Hill, 174). Ed partakes in what Susan Staves defines as a “schizophrenic” process that accompanied the rise of the middle class during the eighteenth century:

Part of the schizophrenia of bourgeois culture was to repress the importance of the very market achievements that gave the bourgeoisie its wealth and power, to insist on nonmonetary motives for action and nonmonetary sources of value, and to cry up the worth of psychic achievements. (223)
Ed attacks marriages based on social and material interests, but on a deeper level he is ambivalent about considerations of income and status. What Ed represses continually bubbles to the surface of the novel, suggesting that the economic basis of his marriage is no less important than the affective one:

I could have wished to have had a fortune worthy of her; this was my wish, not that of my Emily; she will with equal pleasure share with me poverty or riches: I hope her consent to marry me before I leave Canada. I know the advantages of affluence, my dear Temple, and am too reasonable to despise them; I would only avoid rating them above their worth. (265)

The novel ends with a typical coup de théâtre: Emily finally meets her father, Colonel Willmott, thought lost for many years, or even dead. He has put together a “considerable fortune with which he resolved to return to England” (389). Unacquainted with his daughter’s marital status, Colonel Willmott wants Emily to marry a young man he has chosen, one to whose relatives he owes a great debt of gratitude. After worrying for a few pages about Emily’s future and peace of mind, we find out that the spouse chosen for her is none other than Ed Rivers. It is not coincidental that at the end of the story parental choice and filial choice coincide. Idealized love and economic gain are located within the same relation and companionate marriage becomes another social and economic transaction.

Note, Notes, Anmerkungen

1 Lorraine McMullen argues that Frances Brooke is also the author of a novel, All’s Right at Last; or, The History of Miss West, set for the most part in Canada and published anonymously, in London, in 1774 (An Odd Attempt in a Woman, 141-50). Mary Jane Edwards, on the other
hand, maintains that All’s Right is an imitation of The History of Emily Montague and that it is “a novel sometimes wrongly attributed to Brooke” (Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature, 150).


In particular, I refer to: Mary Astell, Some Reflections Upon Marriage (1700) and A Serious Proposal to the Ladies (1701); Jonathan Swift, Letter to a Young Lady on Her Marriage (1723); Daniel Defoe, Conjugal Lewdness: or Matrimonial Whoredom (1727); Wetenhall Wilkes, A Letter of Genteel and Moral Advice to a Young Lady (1740); Mary Wollstonecraft, A Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792).

In her explanatory notes to The History of Emily Montague, Mary Jane Edwards informs us that Françoise d’Aubigné, marquise de Maintenon, was the mistress and, after 1683, the wife of Louis XIV of France. Frances Brooke’s version of the letter quoted by Ed Rivers was probably her own translation based on the French edition of Madame de Maintenon’s epistolary prepared by Anglivel de Beaumelle (424).


Sellwood, Jane. “‘A Little Acid Is Absolutely Necessary’: Narrative as Coquette in Frances Brooke’s *The History of Emily Montague*”. *Canadian Literature* 136 (Spring 1993): 60-79.

