

MARRIAGE AND MORALS REVISITED

PHILIP EBERSOLE
Greater Rochester Russell Set
Rochester, NY 14607, USA
PHILEB@FRONTIERNET.NET

TIMOTHY J. MADIGAN
Philosophy / St. John Fisher College
Rochester, NY 14618, USA
TMADIGAN@SJFC.EDU

Katie Roiphe. *Uncommon Arrangements: Seven Portraits of Married Life in London Literary Circles, 1910–1939*. New York: The Dial Press, 2007. Pp. 343. ISBN 978-0-385-33937-7 (hb). US\$26; CDN\$34.

There is a spectre haunting Katie Roiphe's exploration of Edwardian/Georgian marriage in literary London circles: the spectre of Bertrand Russell, most especially the author of *Marriage and Morals* (1929), a work written in the middle of the period she examines. While Russell makes a few guest appearances in

the text, and while he knew almost everyone in the book (sometimes biblically), it is surprising that Roiphe does not take the opportunity to connect the rather disparate couples she discusses with Russell's contemporary exploration of the meaning of marriage in the post-Victorian era. She focuses on couples living together from directly before the First World War to directly before the Second World War, a period of tremendous change and radical social movements: Modernism, Socialism, Freudianism, and, perhaps most important to the overall structure of the book, Suffragism/Feminism. One of the most telling aspects of *Uncommon Arrangements* is the focus on some—for the times—uncommonly liberated women.

Katie Roiphe is a journalist and an instructor at New York University who has written extensively about modern marriage. Her *Uncommon Arrangements* tells the story of seven married couples in early twentieth-century England, all of whom tried to live outside the framework of conventional society. They revolted against Victorian values and sought to establish relations between men and women on an equal basis. Most of these couples travelled in the same circles as Russell, and were subject to the same intellectual influences. In *Marriage and Morals*—written, ironically, during the time of the slow and painful dissolution of his own second marriage—Russell attempted to advocate a rational code of sexual ethics. He believed in openness and honesty about sex and denied that marital fidelity was the be-all and end-all of morality. The true basis of morality, he said, was respect for the rights and feelings of your partner.

Marriage and Morals was far ahead of its time in arguing that so-called “open marriages” (as well as couples living together without going through a marriage ceremony) were perfectly moral, so long as both partners accepted the conditions and did not engage in any deceptive acts. The couples discussed in *Uncommon Arrangements*—while all were involved in relationships that could charitably be called “open”—did not necessarily adhere to Russell's “no deception” rule. Still, they provide interesting test cases for the idea that you can create a lasting marriage based on your own feelings and ideas without regard for convention.

Interestingly, Roiphe does not deal with some likely suspects from this time period: the Lawrences, Woolfs, Eliots, and Bertrand and Dora Russell.

In the first chapter, Roiphe deals with the “*modus vivendi*” between Wells and his second wife, Jane. Wells rebelled against his convention by first of all divorcing his first wife, Isabel, in 1895, and marrying his cousin Mary Catherine shortly thereafter. As a sign of his domineering personality, he renamed her “Jane”. Wells refused to accept limits on his sexual ambitions. As he put it once, “Except insofar as affection put barriers around me, I have done what I pleased so that every bit of sexual impulse in me has expressed itself” (p. 36).

In 1901, Jane gave birth to their son George Philip Wells. It was a troubled birth, and H. G. ran off. Instead of becoming angry, Jane understood and promised not to make too many demands on him. Thus their *modus vivendi*. H. G.

Wells got to do anything he pleased, and was always welcomed home to a loving wife and well-run household. Jane got to be the pillar of Wells' life and, of course, the wife of a famous man. This was a good bargain for Wells, and he thought his wife was happy with it. Roiphe is not so sure. Many of "Jane"'s letters seem to show a woman not at all pleased by her husband's infidelities, especially when he brought his paramours home with him.

In 1912, Wells met a young writer named Rebecca West (the pen name of Cicely Fairfield). He entered into a love affair with her, with Jane's knowledge, and their illegitimate son, Anthony West, was born in 1914. West was one of the strong feminists of the day. She once wrote an essay entitled "I Regard Marriage with Fear and Horror". Yet she wound up living in isolation in a country cottage, cut off from participation in intellectual life, with a baby and only occasional visits from Wells. (The son would later write a vituperative book describing his own sense of abandonment and lack of love from his famous parents.)

Roiphe next deals with the writer Katherine Mansfield and her sickly husband John Middleton Murry. They called theirs a "child marriage". Murry was unusually passive, and entitled his autobiography *Still Life*. Yet as unsatisfactory a lover as he might be, they remained together, doing their best to adhere to their highly romanticized view of marriage.

For Bertrand Russell enthusiasts, the chapter on Elizabeth von Arnim and John Francis Stanley Russell should prove particularly of interest. Frank was, of course, Bertrand's older brother, and a fascinating figure in his own right. Twice married by the time he met von Arnim, and entangled in many love affairs, he seemed an unlikely figure for the independent von Arnim to find attractive. But their marriage, at least initially, was an example of hope over experience. Elizabeth was a strongly independent woman, the widow of a German count, and was restless under male domination, which was precisely what she had every reason to expect from Frank Russell. He demanded absolute obedience from her and absolute freedom to engage in love affairs, which she could not tolerate. And yet von Arnim was attracted to Frank *because* of his outrageousness (which often bordered on insanity). As Roiphe puts it:

Singular and blustery, the earl had a kind of grandeur. He was, with all of his little fixations and sweeping injustices, a riveting personality. The smallest details of everyday life were fraught with near-operatic importance, and this appealed to her natural storyteller's desire for drama. There was something in his moods that she found sweetly masculine. (P. 122)

In some ways she liked being bullied by him. But she finally reacted against his tyrannical behaviour and left him, later writing a vicious parody of him in her novel *Vera*. Of all the relationships Roiphe discusses, this one—for all its bombast and hurt feelings—is by far the most comical, not least because both partners did not seem to be permanently scarred by their tempestuous time together.

In several of these marriages, there seems to be one partner who is the planet around whom the other revolves as a satellite. In the case of H. G. and Jane Wells, the central figure was H. G. Wells. In the case of Vanessa and Clive Bell, it was Vanessa Bell (the sister of Virginia Woolf). After losing her mother, her sister, her father and then her beloved brother, she married Clive out of loneliness. He formed an intimate friendship (not a love affair) with her sister Virginia. She took the art critic Roger Fry as a lover, and then the bisexual painter Duncan Grant, who continued to have love affairs on the side. All four—Vanessa, Clive, Roger and Duncan—remained on friendly terms. After Vanessa's death at the age of 81, Clive and Duncan lived together in the same house. Her credo was summed up by the advice she gave her son Julian when he was involved in a dubious love affair. "I do terribly want you to be yourself—to have freedom to grow and be whatever you have it in you to be. The only terrible thing seems to be not so much unhappiness—which is inevitable—as being thwarted, stunted, to miss opportunities and not to live fully and completely as far as one can" (pp. 175–6).

Vanessa was at first very happy in the marriage. She found that she and Clive could talk to each other about anything, for days on end, without being bored. But after their son Julian was born in 1908 he, and not Clive, became the centre of her life. Clive felt shut out. He and Vanessa's sister Virginia formed a close relationship, which they called an "affair" and which they concealed from Vanessa, even though it never became a sexual relationship. This is an interesting issue: Is there such a thing as emotional infidelity apart from physical infidelity? Roiphe thinks Virginia saw the friendship with Clive as a way of being close to her sister Vanessa, of being in a sense a part of the marriage.

In 1918 Vanessa's daughter Angelica was born. She was the daughter of Duncan Grant, whom she strongly resembled, but was not told this until she was seventeen. All of Vanessa's relationships were concealed from her children. So even though she had a creed of sexual frankness, her children grew up in an atmosphere of secrecy. There were subjects that could never be discussed. Years later Angelica was courted by Bunny Garnett, Duncan Grant's male lover. Vanessa was horrified by this, but could not explain to Angelica the reason why.

While all this is rather unsettling, it is important to point out that Vanessa was able to manage her complex network of relationships with her husband Clive, her lovers Roger Fry and Duncan Grant and her sister Virginia in a way that kept them together and seemed to satisfy them all.

Bertrand Russell does make more than a guest appearance in the chapter devoted to the marriage of Ottoline and Philip Morrell. She was a patroness of artists and writers, with whom she sometimes had love affairs with her husband's full knowledge. The most famous of these affairs was, of course, with Russell, who maintained cordial relations with Philip and supported his advocacy of no conscription during the First World War.

While happy that her husband had apparently no qualms about her various relationships with other men, Ottoline felt betrayed later in life when she discovered that her husband had also had love affairs, because he had not told her about them. Ottoline and Philip loved each other, but in spite of their supposed openness, their British reserve kept them from sharing their feelings as deeply as they would have wished.

Roiphe's next chapter deals with the long-term relationship between Radclyffe Hall and Una Troubridge. They were a lesbian couple, a type of relationship Russell hardly mentioned in *Marriage and Morals*. Radclyffe Hall was famous as the author of *The Well of Loneliness*, one of the first published novels in English about lesbianism. Her father was a wealthy and dissolute member of the British aristocracy, who was having sex with his maid the day she was born. She grew up a tomboy and considered herself more a man than a woman. When Una Troubridge met her at a party in 1915, Radclyffe was living with an older woman named Mabel Batten. Una was unhappily married to an older man, Admiral Ernest Troubridge, who had given her syphilis.

Una, Mabel and Radclyffe formed a close friendship. The three of them went away on vacation together; eventually Una and Radclyffe formed a sexual relationship, while Radclyffe continued to live with Mabel. After Mabel's death Una and Radclyffe moved in together. *The Well of Loneliness* was published in 1928, and made Hall famous. It was banned in Britain but was published in the United States and France. Radclyffe and Una settled down to a stable relationship not too different from that of H. G. and Jane Wells. Radclyffe was like the philandering husband, Una the faithful wife waiting by the fireside. In 1934 Radclyffe began a love affair with a Russian-born nurse named Evguenia Souline. Una bitterly resented her and resented being part of a love triangle. When Radclyffe fell sick, she influenced her to change her will and freeze Evguenia out.

The last couple dealt with in *Uncommon Arrangements*, Vera Brittain and George Gordon Catlin, had what was called a "semi-detached marriage". She lived in Britain with their son. He spent at least six months of the year in the United States and visited when he could. Vera's close friend Winifred Holtby lived with her, acted as a surrogate parent to the boy and came and went as she wished. Catlin had met Vera Brittain as a result of a fan letter he wrote in 1923 after the publication of her first novel. When he was courting her, he wrote, "I offer you, I think, as free a marriage as it lies in the power of a man to offer a woman. I ask you to give what you want to give, no more." They were married in 1925, and she kept her maiden name, which was unusual then.

The couple went off to the United States where Catlin had a job as an assistant professor at Cornell University. She was unhappy to be cut off from her London friends and confined to the role of a faculty wife. So she moved back to England, and they worked out the "semi-detached" arrangement. Catlin took this as a licence to have love affairs, which, according to Katie Roiphe, Vera ac-

cepted but did not like. In 1933, Vera published her most famous work, *Testament of Youth*, which was about her experiences as a nurse in the First World War and also about the great love of her life, a handsome, idealistic young soldier named Roland Leighton. Their relationship was not a physical one. They were engaged to be married, but they spent only seventeen days together all told before he was killed at the front. He was the grand passion of her life.

The other important person in Vera's life was her roommate, Winifred Holtby, who also was a writer. Amazingly enough, Vera never had a sexual relationship outside the marriage, although once she came close to succumbing to George Brett, publisher of the American edition of *Testament of Youth*. She and Winifred were friends only, not lesbian lovers, and Winifred in fact had a male lover, Harry Pearson, but their friendship was a closer bond than many a sexual relationship. After Winifred's death Catlin wrote bitterly that Vera never loved him as she did Winifred or her dead fiancé Roland.

Russell is a shadowy figure in the background of many of these couples. Frank was his older brother, Ottoline Morrell his lover, and H. G. Wells, Katherine Mansfield, Elizabeth von Arnim and others his friends. The complexity of their relationships was such that the book would have benefited from a chart to indicate who was sleeping with whom, and what degrees of separation they all had from one other.

Uncommon Arrangements could be read as an attempt to put the ideas of *Marriage and Morals* into practice. But in fact the seven couples seem to reflect the ideas of D. H. Lawrence as much or more as they do those of Russell. Lawrence put passion first. If you did not act on your deepest feelings, he argued, you were a coward and a hypocrite. This was the attitude of many of these couples. Ottoline (who knew Lawrence quite well), for instance, had a love affair with her gardener, a strong, good-looking, non-intellectual man who may have been the model for the gamekeeper in Lawrence's *Lady Chatterly's Lover*. Russell's avowal of cool reason as the basis for a good relationship pales in comparison.

Another difference between Russell and these particular couples was that the morality laid out in *Marriage and Morals* placed special emphasis upon child-rearing. Once a couple brings a child into the world, Russell held, the welfare of that child takes precedence over all else. Divorce is moral only when the couple honestly believes they will do the child more harm than good by staying together. While some of the couples in the book were fond of their children, this did not seem to restrain their passions. Vanessa Bell's children in particular were upset by their awareness of all the hidden things going on around them which must never be talked about. And Roiphe gives the following poignant passage about the Wells' family: "There is a photograph of the family—the two little boys in sailor suits, kneeling on the floor with a train set, Wells hovering restlessly in the doorway, and his wife slumped in a rocking chair in an unmistak-

able posture of defeat—that hints at a different family portrait than the one Wells so painstakingly paints” (p. 56). A commitment to honesty and openness paradoxically resulted in a life of secrecy and taboos when it came to the children.

Russell himself, during the time period of Roiphe’s book, lived as much according to D. H. Lawrence’s code as his own. As a young man, he was a slave of his inhibitions; but as a middle-aged man, he was a slave of his passions. He was to be married four times, and had innumerable love affairs. In this he demonstrated marked similarities to Frank—but he was definitely more stable and less tyrannical. Indeed, he sympathized with von Arnim rather than with his own brother and encouraged her to divorce him (and, Roiphe points out, there were rumours of an affair between the two of them which the volatile Frank, fortunately, never got wind of).

Roiphe chose these particular couples because their lives and feelings were documented so extensively in letters and diaries. And that may be the problem in getting a sense of just what motivated them to enter into such relationships: when it comes to understanding why they did what they did, there is often too much detail to wade through. In their relentless desire to be true to their own selves there is often an unhealthy air of self-centredness. One cannot help but wonder if the couples involved are describing a new sexual code of ethics, or only capturing familiar types of relationships which had previously not been considered appropriate material for posterity.

The common theme of almost all the participants involved, as well as the Russellian ghost lurking in the background, was an overwhelming desire to WRITE. No doubt this is central to Roiphe’s own interest in these specific individuals. Like an archeologist, she sifts through their various diaries, letters, novels and other written works to seek answers to the question: what is the essence of a marriage? She writes that there is a mystery in other people’s love-lives that cannot be penetrated by outsiders. *Uncommon Arrangements* ably shows that this is very true. Defiance of convention did not make these couples happy, but it is not clear that they would have been less unhappy if they had been more conventional. If there is a moral to this book, it is that there is no royal road to marital happiness. People who tinker with the traditional institution of marriage often lead unhappy lives. But then, so do people who accept the traditional institution of marriage. As Russell himself stated in the second volume of his *Autobiography*: “I do not know what I think now on the subject of marriage. There seem to be insuperable objections to every general theory about it. Perhaps easy divorce causes less unhappiness than any other system, but I am no longer capable of being dogmatic on the subject of marriage” (2: 156). When all is said and done, Katie Roiphe too—while giving us an interesting historic look at some nonconventional relationships—ultimately leaves unsolved the mystery to that age-old question: “What is this thing called ‘love’?”
