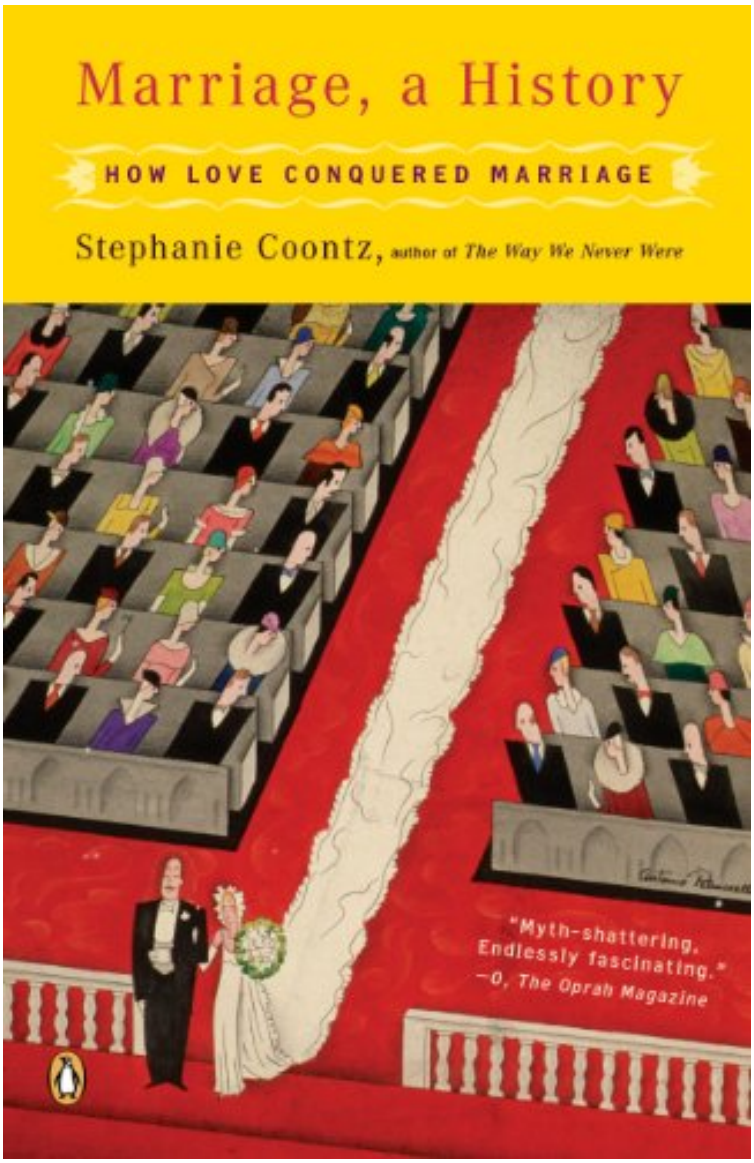
Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage



Par Stephanie Coontz
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(Mobile library) Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurJust when the clamor over "traditional" marriage couldnt get any louder, along comes this groundbreaking book to ask, "What tradition?" In Marriage, a History, historian and marriage expert Stephanie Coontz takes readers from the marital intrigues of ancient Babylon to the torments of Victorian lovers to demonstrate how recent the idea of marrying for love isand how absurd it would have seemed to most of our ancestors. It was when marriage moved into the emotional sphere in the nineteenth century, she argues, that it suffered as an institution just as it began to thrive as a personal relationship. This enlightening

and hugely entertaining book brings intelligence, perspective, and wit to todays marital debate..com Politics, economics, greed, sex, carswithout them, matrimony wouldnt have caused the historical revolution ensuing today, concludes social historian Stephanie Coontz, in Marriage, a History. Modern marriage is in crisis; but dont pine for a return to "the good old days," when men earned money and women kept house. Dont even assume the crisis is all bad. For as Coontz reveals in this ambitious, multi-century trek through wedlock, marriage has morphed into the highest expression of commitment in Western Europe and North America; and though assumptions no longer exist regarding which partner may say "I do" to work, childcare, or other shared responsibilities, a clear set of rules about saying "I dont" (to infidelity and irresponsibility) rings loud as church bells. "This is not the book I thought I was going to write," Coontz admits. She intended to show that marriage was not in crisis; merely changing in expected ways. But her exhaustive research suggested the opposite was true. Tracing matrimonys path from ancient times (when some cultures lacked a word for "love" and the majority of pairings were attempts to seize land or family names) through present day, she closely examines the many external forces at play in shaping modern marriage. Coontz details how societys attempts to toughen this institution, have actually made it more fragile. Her rich talent for analyzing events, statistics, and theories from a myriad of sourcesand enabling the reader to put them all in perspectivemake this provocative history book an essential resource.--Liane ThomasExtraitGeorge Bernard Shaw described marriage as an institution that brings together two people under the influence of the most violent, most insane, most delusive, and most transient of passions. They are required to swear that they will remain in that excited, abnormal, and exhausting condition continuously until death do them part.1Shaws comment was amusing when he wrote it at the beginning of the twentieth century, and it still makes us smile today, because it pokes fun at the unrealistic expectations that spring from a dearly held cultural ideal that marriage should be based on intense, profound love and a couple should maintain their ardor until death do them part. But for thousands of years the joke would have fallen flat.For most of history it was inconceivable that people would choose their mates on the basis of something as fragile and irrational as love and then focus all their sexual, intimate, and altruistic desires on the resulting marriage. In fact, many historians, sociologists, and anthropologists used to think romantic love was a recent Western invention. This is not true. People have always fallen in love, and throughout the ages many couples have loved each other deeply.2But only rarely in history has love been seen as the main reason for getting married. When someone did advocate such a strange belief, it was no laughing matter. Instead, it was considered a serious threat to social order.In some cultures and times, true love was actually thought to be incompatible with marriage. Plato believed love was a wonderful emotion that led men to behave honorably. But the Greek philosopher was referring not to the love of women, such as the meaner men feel, but to the love of one man for another.3Other societies considered it good if love developed after marriage or thought love should be factored in along with the more serious considerations involved in choosing a mate. But even when past societies did welcome or encourage married love, they kept it on a short leash. Couples were not to put their feelings for each other above more important commitments, such as their ties to parents, siblings, cousins, neighbors, or God.In ancient India, falling in love before marriage was seen as a disruptive, almost antisocial act. The Greeks thought lovesickness was a type of insanity, a view that was adopted by medieval commentators in Europe. In the Middle Ages the French defined love as a derangement of the mind that could be cured by sexual intercourse, either with the loved one or with a different partner.4 This cure assumed, as Oscar Wilde once put it, that the quickest way to conquer yearning and temptation was to yield immediately and move on to more important matters.In China, excessive love between husband and wife was seen as a threat to the solidarity of the extended family. Parents could force a son to divorce his wife if her behavior or work habits didnt please them, whether or not he loved her. They could also require him take a concubine if his wife did not produce a son. If a sons romantic attachment to his wife rivaled his parents claims on the couples time and labor, the parents might even send her back to her parents. In the Chinese language the term love did not traditionally apply to feelings between husband and wife. It was used to describe an illicit, socially disapproved relationship. In the 1920s a group of intellectuals invented a new word for love between spouses because they thought such a radical new idea required its own special label.5In Europe, during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, adultery became idealized as the highest form of love among the aristocracy. According to the Countess of Champagne, it was impossible for true love to exert its powers between two people who are married to each other.6In twelfth-century France, Andreas Capellanus, chaplain to Countess Marie of Troyes, wrote a treatise on the principles of courtly love. The first rule was that marriage is no real excuse for not loving. But he meant loving someone outside the marriage. As late as the eighteenth century

the French essayist Montaigne wrote that any man who was in love with his wife was a man so dull that no one else could love him.7Courtly love probably loomed larger in literature than in real life. But for centuries, noblemen and kings fell in love with courtesans rather than the wives they married for political reasons. Queens and noblewomen had to be more discreet than their husbands, but they too looked beyond marriage for love and intimacy.This sharp distinction between love and marriage was common among the lower and middle classes as well. Many of the songs and stories popular among peasants in medieval Europe mocked married love.The most famous love affair of the Middle Ages was that of Peter Abelard, a well-known theologian in France, and Heloise, the brilliant niece of a fellow churchman at Notre Dame. The two eloped without marrying, and she bore him a child. In an attempt to save his career but still placate Heloises furious uncle, Abelard proposed they marry in secret. This would mean that Heloise would not be living in sin, while Abelard could still pursue his church ambitions. But Heloise resisted the idea, arguing that marriage would not only harm his career but also undermine their love.8Nothing Is More Impure Than to Love Ones Wife as if She Were a Mistress9Even in societies that esteemed married love, couples were expected to keep it under strict control. In many cultures, public displays of love between husband and wife were considered unseemly. A Roman was expelled from the Senate because he had kissed his wife in front of his daughter. Plutarch conceded that the punishment was somewhat extreme but pointed out that everyone knew that it was disgraceful to kiss ones wife in front of others.10Some Greek and Roman philosophers even said that a man who loved his wife with excessive ardor was an adulterer. Many centuries later Catholic and Protestant theologians argued that husbands and wives who loved each other too much were committing the sin of idolatry. Theologians chided wives who used endearing nicknames for their husbands, because such familiarity on a wifes part undermined the husbands authority and the awe that his wife should feel for him. Although medieval Muslim thinkers were more approving of sexual passion between husband and wife than were Christian theologians, they also insisted that too much intimacy between husband and wife weakened a believers devotion to God. And, like their European counterparts, secular writers in the Islamic world believed that love thrived best outside marriage.11Many cultures still frown on placing love at the center of marriage. In Africa, the Fulbe people of northern Cameroon do not see love as a legitimate emotion, especially within marriage. One observer reports that in conversations with their neighbors, Fulbe women vehemently deny emotional attachment to a husband. In many peasant and working-class communities, too much love between husband and wife is seen as disruptive because it encourages the couple to withdraw from the wider web of dependence that makes the society work.12As a result, men and women often relate to each other in public, even after marriage, through the conventions of a war between the sexes, disguising the fondness they may really feel. They describe their marital behavior, no matter how exemplary it may actually be, in terms of convenience, compulsion, or self-interest rather than love or sentiment. In Cockney rhyming slang, the term for wife is trouble and strife.Whether it is valued or not, love is rarely seen as the main ingredient for marital success. Among the Taita of Kenya, recognition and approval of married love are widespread. An eighty-year-old man recalled that his fourth wife was the wife of my heart....I could look at her and no words would pass, just a smile. In this society, where men often take several wives, women speak wistfully about how wonderful it is to be a love wife. But only a small percentage of Taita women experience this luxury, because a Taita man normally marries a love wife only after he has accumulated a few more practical wives.13In many cultures, love has been seen as a desirable outcome of marriage but not as a good reason for getting married in the first place. The Hindu tradition celebrates love and sexuality in marriage, but love and sexual attraction are not considered valid reasons for marriage. First we marry, then well fall in love is the formula. As recently as 1975, a survey of college students in the Indian state of Karnataka found that only 18 percent strongly approved of marriages made on the basis of love, while 32 percent completely disapproved.14Similarly, in early modern Europe most people believed that love developed after marriage. Moralists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries argued that if a husband and wife each had a good character, they would probably come to love each other. But they insisted that youths be guided by their families in choosing spouses who were worth learning to love. It was up to parents and other relatives to make sure that the woman had a dowry or the man had a good yearly income. Such capital, it was thought, would certainly help love flower.15[I]t Made Me Really Sick, Just as I Have Formerly Been When in Love with My WifeI dont believe that people of the past had more control over their hearts than we do today or that they were incapable of the deep love so many individuals now hope to achieve in marriage. But love in marriage was seen as a bonus, not as a necessity. The great Roman statesman Cicero exchanged many loving letters with his wife, Terentia, during their thirty-year marriage. But that didnt stop him from

divorcing her when she was no longer able to support him in the style to which he had become accustomed.16Sometimes people didnt have to make such hard choices. In seventeenth-century America, Anne Bradstreet was the favorite child of an indulgent father who gave her the kind of education usually reserved for elite boys. He later arranged her marriage to a cherished childhood friend who eventually became the governor of Massachusetts. Combining love, duty, material security, and marriage was not the strain for her that it was for many men and women of that era. Anne wrote love poems to her husband that completely ignored the injunction of Puritan ministers not to place ones spouse too high in ones affections. If ever two were one, she wrote him, then surely we; if ever man were loved by wife, then thee....I prize thy love more than whole mines of gold, or all the riches that the East doth hold; my love is such that rivers cannot quench, nor ought but love from thee, give recompense.17The famous seventeenth-century English diarist Samuel Pepys chose to marry for love rather than profit. But he was not as lucky as Anne. After hearing a particularly stirring piece of music, Pepys recorded that it did wrap up my soul so that it made me really sick, just as I have formerly been when in love with my wife.18 Pepys would later disinherit a nephew for marrying under the influence of so strong yet transient an emotion.There were always youngsters who resisted the pressures of parents, kin, and neighbors to marry for practical reasons rather than love, but most accepted or even welcomed the interference of parents and others in arranging their marriages. A common saying in early modern Europe was He who marries for love has good nights and bad days. Nowadays a bitter wife or husband might ask, Whatever possessed me to think I loved you enough to marry you? Through most of the past, he or she was more likely to have asked, Whatever possessed me to marry you just because I loved you?Happily Ever AfterThrough most of the past, individuals hoped to find love, or at least tranquil affection, in marriage.19 But nowhere did they have the same recipe for marital happiness that prevails in most contemporary Western countries. Today there is general agreement on what it takes for a couple to live happily ever after. First, they must love each other deeply and choose each other unswayed by outside pressure. From then on, each must make the partner the top priority in life, putting that relationship above any and all competing ties. A husband and wife, we believe, owe their highest obligations and deepest loyalties to each other and the children they raise. Parents and in-laws should not be allowed to interfere in the marriage. Married couples should be best friends, sharing their most intimate feelings and secrets. They should express affection openly but also talk candidly about problems. And of course they should be sexually faithful to each other.This package of expectations about love, marriage, and sex, however, is extremely rare. When we look at the historical record around the world, the customs of modern America and Western Europe appear exotic and exceptional.Leo Tolstoy once remarked that all happy families are alike, while every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. But the more I study the history of marriage, the more I think the opposite is true. Most unhappy marriages in history share common patterns, leaving their tear-stainedand sometimes bloodstainedrecords across the ages. But each happy, successful marriage seems to be happy in its own way. And for most of human history, successful marriages have not been happy in our way.A woman in ancient China might bring one or more of her sisters to her husbands home as backup wives. Eskimo couples often had cospousal arrangements, in which each partner had sexual relations with the others spouse. In Tibet and parts of India, Kashmir, and Nepal, a woman may be married to two or more brothers, all of whom share sexual access to her.20In modern America, such practices are the stuff of trash TV: I caught my sister in bed with my husband; My parents brought their lovers into our home; My wife slept with my brother; It broke my heart to share my husband with another woman. In other cultures, individuals often find such practices normal and comforting. The children of Eskimo cospouses felt that they shared a special bond, and society viewed them as siblings. Among Tibetan brothers who share the same wife, sexual jealousy is rare.21In some cultures, cowives see one another as allies rather than rivals. In Botswana, women add an interesting wrinkle to the old European saying Womans work is never done. There they say: Without cowives, a womans work is never done. A researcher who worked with the Cheyenne Indians of the United States in the 1930s and 1940s told of a chief who tried to get rid of two of his three wives. All three women defied him, saying that if he sent two of them away, he would have to give away the third as well.22Even when societies celebrated the love between husband and wife as a pleasant by-product of marriage, people rarely had a high regard for marital intimacy. Chinese commentators on marriage discouraged a wife from confiding in her husband or telling him about her day. A good wife did not bother her husband with news of her own activities and feelings but treated him like a guest, no matter how long they had been married. A husband who demonstrated open affection for his wife, even at home, was seen as having a weak character.23In the early eighteenth century, American lovers often said they looked for

candor in each other. But they were not talking about the soul-baring intimacy idealized by modern Americans, and they certainly did not believe that couples should talk frankly about their grievances. Instead candor meant fairness, kindliness, and good temper. People wanted a spouse who did not pry too deeply. The ideal mate, wrote U.S. President John Adams in his diary, was willing to palliate faults and Mistakes, to put the best Construction upon Words and Action, and to forgive Injuries.24Modern marital advice books invariably tell husbands and wives to put each other first. But in many societies, marriage ranks very low in the hierarchy of meaningful relationships. Peoples strongest loyalties and emotional connections may be reserved for members of their birth families. On the North American plains in the 1930s, a Kiowa Indian woman commented to a researcher that a woman can always get another husband, but she has only one brother. In China it was said that you have only one family, but you can always get another wife. In Christian texts prior to the seventeenth century, the word love usually referred to feelings toward God or neighbors rather than toward a spouse.25In Confucian philosophy, the two strongest relationships in family life are between father and son and between elder brother and younger brother, not between husband and wife. In thirteenth-century China the bond between father and son was so much stronger than the bond between husband and wife that legal commentators insisted a couple do nothing if the patriarch of the household raped his sons wife. In one case, although the judge was sure that a womans rape accusation against her father-in-law was true, he ordered the young man to give up his sentimental desire to grow old together with his wife. Loyalty to parents was paramount, and therefore the son should send his wife back to her own father, who could then marry her to someone else. Sons were sometimes ordered beaten for siding with their wives against their father. No wonder that for 1,700 years women in one Chinese province guarded a secret language that they used to commiserate with each other about the griefs of marriage.26In many societies of the past, sexual loyalty was not a high priority. The expectation of mutual fidelity is a rather recent invention. Numerous cultures have allowed husbands to seek sexual gratification outside marriage. Less frequently, but often enough to challenge common preconceptions, wives have also been allowed to do this without threatening the marriage. In a study of 109 societies, anthropologists found that only 48 forbade extramarital sex to both husbands and wives.27When a woman has sex with someone other than her husband and he doesnt object, anthropologists have traditionally called it wife loaning. When a man does it, they call it male privilege. But in some societies the choice to switch partners rests with the woman. Among the Dogon of West Africa, young married women publicly pursued extramarital relationships with the encouragement of their mothers. Among the Rukuba of Nigeria, a wife can take a lover at the time of her first marriage. This relationship is so embedded in accepted custom that the lover has the right, later in life, to ask his former mistress to marry her daughter to his son.28Among the Eskimo of northern Alaska, as I noted earlier, husbands and wives, with mutual consent, established comarriages with other couples. Some anthropologists believe cospouse relationships were a more socially acceptable outlet for sexual attraction than was marriage itself. Expressing open jealousy about the sexual relationships involved was considered boorish.29Such different notions of marital rights and obligations made divorce and remarriage less emotionally volatile for the Eskimo than it is for most modern Americans. In fact, the Eskimo believed that a remarried persons partner had an obligation to allow the former spouse, as well as any children of that union, the right to fish, hunt, and gather in the new spouses territory.30Several small-scale societies in South America have sexual and marital norms that are especially startling for Europeans and North Americans. In these groups, people believe that any man who has sex with a woman during her pregnancy contributes part of his biological substance to the child. The husband is recognized as the primary father, but the womans lover or lovers also have paternal responsibilities, including the obligation to share food with the woman and her child in the future. During the 1990s researchers taking life histories of elderly Bari women in Venezuela found that most had taken lovers during at least one of their pregnancies. Their husbands were usually aware and did not object. When a woman gave birth, she would name all the men she had slept with since learning she was pregnant, and a woman attending the birth would tell each of these men: You have a child.31In Europe and the United States today such an arrangement would be a surefire recipe for jealousy, bitter breakups, and very mixed-up kids. But among the Bari people this practice was in the best interests of the child. The secondary fathers were expected to provide the child with fish and game, with the result that a child with a secondary father was twice as likely to live to the age of fifteen as a brother or sister without such a father.32Few other societies have incorporated extramarital relationships so successfully into marriage and child rearing. But all these examples of differing marital and sexual norms make it difficult to claim there is some universal model for the success or happiness of a marriage.About two centuries ago

Western Europe and North America developed a whole set of new values about the way to organize marriage and sexuality, and many of these values are now spreading across the globe. In this Western model, people expect marriage to satisfy more of their psychological and social needs than ever before. Marriage is supposed to be free of the coercion, violence, and gender inequalities that were tolerated in the past. Individuals want marriage to meet most of their needs for intimacy and affection and all their needs for sex.Never before in history had societies thought that such a set of high expectations about marriage was either realistic or desirable. Although many Europeans and Americans found tremendous joy in building their relationships around these values, the adoption of these unprecedented goals for marriage had unanticipated and revolutionary consequences that have since come to threaten the stability of the entire institution.