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I Now Pronounce You Totally Confused

By DAHLIA LITHWICK

If you've spent any part of the past year watching the spectacular train wrecks of celebrity marriages, you will know that recent public displays of carnage include the spattered bits of Mr. and Mrs. Charlie Sheen, Mr. and Mrs. Bill Murray, Sir and Mrs. Paul McCartney, and Mr. and Mrs. Christie Brinkley. Watching the wealthy and famous bicker over children, vacation homes and Tupperware invariably leads one to the same question: Why bother? At a time when more than 40 percent of all marriages end in divorce, why not simply move to a system of short-term leases?

Various state supreme courts have been grappling with this conundrum as they try to determine whether to expand the definition of marriage to include gay couples, a question California voters are poised to answer in November. This has forced groups on both sides of the issue to struggle to define the essential purpose of marriage. Is it a religious sacrament or merely a civil allocation of property rights? Is marriage a way of optimizing the rearing of children or an ancient way of enforcing female chastity? In legalizing gay marriage in 2003, the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts insisted that marriage encourages "stable relationships over transient ones," "provides for the orderly distribution of property" and promotes "a stable setting for child rearing." The Washington Supreme Court, in refusing to strike down that state's ban on gay marriage in 2006, rooted its logic in a view of marriage as an institution that exists to "promote procreation and to encourage stable families."

It's a testament to our national confusion about the purpose of marriage that the courts can toggle this way between four or five rationales for such a union in a single judicial opinion, with little regard for any one coherent principle. In "I Don't: A Contrarian History of Marriage," Susan Squire explains that this is because there is no single coherent principle behind modern marriage. As currently practiced, the institution is a hodgepodge of biblical, classical, courty and Christian rules and mores. What we know as "marriage" is rooted in warring historical efforts at regulating procreation; tamping down sexual lust (especially female lust); and — only relatively recently — celebrating companionship and romantic love. Those of us who speak reverently about the sanctity of marriage must also acknowledge that modern matrimony is less a sacred vessel than a crazy quilt.

Squire begins quite literally In the Beginning, reminding us that the book of Genesis contains not one but two versions of the creation story. Yes, it's true. While Genesis 3:16 got us off on the wrong foot for centuries with the fateful words "your husband . . . shall rule over you," Genesis 1 in fact had already offered a less dramatic, ribless version of creation in which God creates man and woman simultaneously and commands them to "fill the earth and master it," together. The second version of creation, the one with the serpent and the apple and

http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/07/books/review/Lithwick-t.html?_r=1&ei=5070&oref=... 9/16/2008
the betrayal of all mankind by womankind, makes for better theater. But according to Squire, it also gained cultural and literary dominance because it highlighted the earliest rationale for marriage: control your women, or they will rule over you. It’s all downhill from there.

“I Don’t” leads us through the many twists and turns of marital history, starting with the biblical Israelites’ tradition of matrilineal descent and polygamy (and of squabbling wives) and the ancient Athenian system of something akin to gold, silver and bronze wives (for the aristocracy, at least). The Greek orator Demosthenes put it this way: “We keep hetaerae” — mistresses — “for our delight, concubines for the daily needs of our bodies, wives so that we may breed legitimate children and have faithful housekeepers.” It may not sound perfect, but there would be a lot fewer political careers in tatters today had such hard-headed pragmatism survived in America.

Squire links the fall of the Roman Empire, at least in part, with the spread of a form of trial marriage called usus that required no solemnization, no transfer of authority or property, and that seems to have given Roman women considerable sexual freedom (even if they remained under the control of their fathers). She distances herself from the naysayers who blamed loose sexual morality for the fall of the Roman Empire but traces the ways in which Christianity would come to stand as a corrective to the fast-and-loose ways of the ancient Romans.

The author is at her wickedly funniest in her descriptions of what would soon become (in the words of Heinrich Heine) “the starvation diet of Christianity.” For centuries, the church characterized marriage as a highly distasteful “lust containment facility,” as Squire puts it, for those who could not achieve the ideal of childless celibacy, putting love of God ahead of love of family. In Squire’s version, from Paul’s admonition that “women should be silent in the churches” (although in general Paul favored mutually respectful marriage) to the second-century theologian Tertullian’s declaration that “woman is the gateway through which the devil comes,” Christian marriage becomes one necessary evil that constrains yet another necessary evil: women. Throughout the Dark Ages, the church closely regulated every aspect of sex and marriage, meting out punishment for, among other transgressions, seeing one’s wife naked, slipping one’s husband an aphrodisiac or having intercourse on a Wednesday, Friday or Sunday. According to Squire, the church was so fanatically in favor of joyless, loveless, sexless marriage (while doling out all manner of indulgences for the deep-pocketed unmarried celibates who strayed) that it would take a noisy revolution to shake its control.

That revolution began with the rise of the cult of courtly love among the aristocracy, which was resentful of the church’s meddling in their mating habits. It picked up steam during the Black Death, which shook ordinary believers’ faith in church doctrine by killing off the righteous alongside the wicked. And it achieved perfection in the miraculously happy marriage of a 42-year-old virgin named Martin Luther. Luther, a monk, had long railed against the evils of celibacy, believing that church doctrine had resulted in corruption and fornication. But he became his own best advertisement when he was dragged out of his monastic solitude by a 26-year-old runaway nun named Katherine von Bora. When his Katy bears and raises six children and four foster children, hauls them to the Holy Land on pilgrimage, tends his garden and makes his home-grown medicines, exterminates the mice in his barn and makes him wine and beer, all while playing hostess to a houseful of reverent disciples and acolytes, Luther is the happiest of spokesmen. And so, as part of his war on the corrupt church, he ushers in a new era of marriage, shunning celibacy and exalting companionship, procreation and fidelity. The 1,500-year-old idea of marriage as a necessary repository for the filth of human

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desire comes to an end. We will finally begin to marry for love. Some of us more than once.

It’s not always easy to follow the hops and skips of Squire’s logical structure, and at times her penchant for one-linery gets in the way of her argument as opposed to helping it along. But “I Don’t” is a charming book and a wonderful resource for those who think they have a bead on why the church and everyone purporting to speak for the church got themselves so firmly entrenched in the marriage business in the first place. As we head into the presidential election, you may find yourself channeling Squire as you puzzle out your feelings about the Obama marriage (two parts Martin Luther, one part ancient Rome?) as well as that of the McCains (one part Eleanor of Aquitaine, two parts ancient Greece?).

Marriage is one of the last manifestations of human optimism. And whether we aspire to perfect holiness or romance, the reality is almost certain to disappoint. As Oscar Wilde put it, “The only charm of marriage is that it makes a life of deception necessary for both parties.” “I Don’t” reminds us we’ve been aspiring to such deceptions for thousands of years. That alone is reason to hope.

*Dahlia Lithwick is a senior editor at Slate.*