



Routledge Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Literature

STORIES OF LOVE FROM VIKINGS TO TINDER

THE EVOLUTION OF MODERN MATING IDEOLOGIES,
DATING DYSFUNCTION, AND DEMOGRAPHIC COLLAPSE

Mads Larsen



Stories of Love from Vikings to Tinder

Increasing levels of singledom, dating dysfunction, and sexual inactivity contribute to plummeting fertility rates. This book investigates the perhaps most foundational factor behind this uncoupling: our present era's ideology of love. Throughout human history, communities have shared fictional stories infused with various mating moralities that compel people to pair-bond and reproduce. After taking readers on a 6-million-year journey through hominin mating regimes—with various extents of promiscuity, polygyny, and monogamy—*Stories of Love from Vikings to Tinder* investigates the past millennium's radical evolution of Western mating beliefs. Nordic literary works illuminate the pivotal transitions between the West's First, Second, and Third Sexual Revolutions, which occurred around the years 1200, 1750, and 1968. The conclusion chapter points to the Fourth Sexual Revolution, symbolically placed in 2029. Artificial intelligence and other technologies seem likely to transform our mating practices more radically than any of the previous revolutions.

Mads Larsen is a literary scholar who uses evolutionary perspectives to study cultural change. After earning a PhD and an MFA from the University of California, Los Angeles, he became a Postdoc and Researcher at the University of Oslo. Larsen has published over three dozen articles. *Stories of Love from Vikings to Tinder* is his first research monograph. He co-authored a book on evolutionary positive psychology. His upcoming monograph is *Master-Narrative Transitions from the Vikings to A.I.: How Fiction Helps Communities Adapt to a Changing World*. Larsen was a review editor for *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture* and serves on the editorial board of *Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences*.

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Stories of Love from Vikings to Tinder

The Evolution of Modern Mating
Ideologies, Dating Dysfunction, and
Demographic Collapse

Mads Larsen

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Figure 0.1 A Heart Divided. Artwork by Louise.



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Introduction

Western Ideologies of Love

Humanity approaches a demographic abyss. In an increasing number of countries, the fertility rate has fallen far below replacement levels.¹ South Koreans lead the way to self-eradication with a rate of 0.7 children per woman.² Some experts and opinion makers warn that a too-rapid aging of national populations is our era's gravest threat to civilization.³ Others are even gloomier, fearing that if cultural globalization continues to spread this trend, our species might be headed for extinction.⁴ The Nordic countries used to be a Western anomaly. Their high fertility was assumed to result from gender equality and generous parental welfare. Some thought the solution to low fertility was that all countries would have to implement social democratic policies. But, in the 2010s, also Nordic fertility numbers plummeted.⁵ Experts give an impression of not knowing why this is occurring or which policies could counter the impending collapse.⁶ Certain factors are thought to contribute to the downward spiral, such as urbanization, good contraceptives, a fear of the future, gender equality, economic inequality, and rampant individualism. In this book, I investigate the perhaps most foundational factor: our present era's ideology of love.⁷

Our ancestors evolved the capacity for romantic love probably around 4 million years ago.⁸ As offspring grew increasingly needy, fathers were incentivized to contribute with calories and protection. The emergence of strong emotions between parents—what we moderns call love—motivated cooperation through the child's most vulnerable phase. Since then, how hominins mate has kept changing.⁹ Early on, biological evolution contributed to new emotions or body shapes that matched novel mating requirements. Modern humans have been dependent on new culture. Different environments have required distinct ways of thinking and acting with regard to copulation and pair-bonding. This process of change accelerated a millennium ago. The emergence of modernity required that the West develop and forge consensus around a line of new mating moralities. Antiquity's *heroic love* gave way to medieval *courtly* and *companionate love*, which were superseded by modern *libertine*, *romantic*, and *confluent love* (Figure I.1).¹⁰

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Western Mating Regimes

Authority:	Kin Group		Family		Individual	
Female:	Submission	Consent	Partnership		Choice	Self-Realization
Marriage Pattern:	Global		European		Modern	Postmodern
Sexual Revolutions:	1st				2nd	3rd 4th
Mating Ideology:	Heroic Love	Courtly Love	Companionate Love		Libertine Love Romantic Love	Dataist love Confluent Love Queer love
Year:	1250		1500		1750	2000
Case Studies:	Icelandic Sagas (1200s) <i>Tristrams saga</i> (1226)		Holberg's Comedies (1722-54) <i>Fredman's Epistles</i> (1770-90) <i>The Unfaithful Wife</i> (c. 1500)		<i>The Serious Game</i> (1912-2016) <i>The Modern Breakthrough</i> (1871-88) <i>The Magic Goblet</i> (1841)	<i>Sigurd and Malmö</i> (2020s) <i>Baby Jane</i> (2005)

Figure I.1 Changes in mating morality after the early-second-millennium Church dissolved Europe's polygynous kinship societies. Years correspond to transitions in the Nordic region. Each consecutive ideology empowered women as individuals. **Heroic love:** A woman should submit to the greater warrior. **Courtly love:** A man should earn a woman's consent through chivalrous behavior and reciprocal passion. **Companionate love:** Lifelong pair-bonds informed by pragmatic concern. **Libertine love:** Pleasure-seeking through uncommitted copulation. **Romantic love:** Individuals should follow their emotions and merge with a lifelong mate. **Confluent love:** A pair-bond should last only for as long as both parties benefit. **Queer love:** Nonheteronormative mating and ideology. **Dataist love:** Artificial intelligence matches people and facilitates emotions. **Global marriage pattern:** A man around 30 years old marries a woman around 20, or both are around 20 and move in with his parents. **European marriage pattern:** After a period of resource accumulation, a woman around 25+ establishes a new household with a slightly older man. **Modern marriage pattern:** Based on emotion and individual choice, with increasing rates of marriage and premarital sex. **Postmodern marriage pattern:** Low marriage rate, frequent divorce, serial monogamy, high singledom and promiscuity, and collapsing fertility rates.

These ideologies of love underpinned very different mating regimes. To understand today's dysfunctional dating markets, which contribute to the impending demographic collapse, we must understand how the post-1968 ideology of confluent love affects our thoughts and behavior. Through investigating our ancestors' beliefs and practices, we gain insight into how we arrived at where we are today, and what our plausible options are for the future. In this study, I explore the Western mating moralities of the past millennium through analyzing illuminating works of fiction. Human communities use literature and other fictional formats to disseminate, and

also scrutinize, their norms and values for copulation and pair-bonding. My literary analyses offer insights into the different mating moralities and the challenging transitions between them. I begin with the Icelandic sagas in Chapter 1, which engage the West's First Sexual Revolution around 1200.¹¹ In Chapter 10, my exploratory journey ends with works from the 2020s, which illuminate the challenges that must be solved by the upcoming Fourth Sexual Revolution. To set the stage for this investigation, the Introduction chapter covers the following: (1) the relationship between modernity and mating moralities; (2) how communities use fiction to update their beliefs; (3) how modern dating dysfunction marginalizes groups of men and women; (4) why an evolutionary perspective helps us understand sex and relationships; (5) the 6-million-year history of hominin mating; and (6) the fictional works I will analyze in the chapters ahead.

Mating Moralities and Modernity

A mating morality consists of the beliefs, values, and norms regarding sex, relationships, and reproduction around which a cultural region and its communities unite. I have selected Western moralities as my topic of study. These were not clearly defined, monolithic ideologies of love but comprised regional, local, and individual creeds that evolved across time. Non-Western regions that today experience dropping fertility rates have mating moralities that are similar to those in the West, but these are not the focus of this book. A community's mating beliefs and practices are intricately tied to their *master-narrative*, which is the foundational story that ties together a community, makes them agree on how to interpret reality, and motivates their actions.¹² A master-narrative is "an overall account of things that enables people to find belief, pattern, and meaning in their experiences."¹³ The influence goes both ways. Having, for instance, a Christian master-narrative affects the content of a community's mating morality. In the other direction, what an environment requires in order for mating to be functional affects the foundational beliefs of its inhabitants. Groups that are unable to reconcile mating requirements with their master-narrative generate dysfunctional mating morality, which undermines a group's functionality and, in the long run, threatens its existence.

How people engage erotically and romantically might not sound paramount. From an evolutionary perspective, nothing is more important than reproduction. How this is facilitated is the foundation of every social order. Had the early-second-millennium Church not dissolved Europe's polygynous kinship societies, the modern world would not have come about, at least not as it did.¹⁴ In antiquity, powerful men had been incentivized to compete throughout their adult life for additional women. Stark competition drove a zero-sum mentality that detracted from their communities' cooperative capabilities. Polygynous woman-hoarding had also motivated

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attacks on neighboring peoples to abduct their females. After the West's First Sexual Revolution, a new way of life changed Europeans. Living in nuclear families, rather than tight-knit kin groups, drove an increasingly individualistic psychology. Western thought became more abstract. Parents began to invest more in each child. As the centuries passed, a culture of cooperation, innovation, and progress took hold.

After six decades of scholarly investigation, a consensus is forming around modernity's origin point being the abandoning of the polygynous mating regimes that had marked humanity's agricultural period.¹⁵ Had medieval Europeans not transitioned to the monogamous feudal order,¹⁶ anthropologist Joseph Henrich argues—with troves of empirical evidence—the West would have had a historical trajectory similar to those of the world's other regions, which did not lead to modernity.¹⁷ You probably would not be reading books on computer screens. The sexual egalitarianism that resulted from the Church's imposition of lifelong monogamy—even on the most powerful of men¹⁸—drove a social stability and cultural psychology that helped the West outcompete and dominate the rest of the world.¹⁹ As I cover later in this chapter, this was not the first time a change in mating practices transformed the world.

Fiction Helps Us Update Our Beliefs

The coevolution of mating and modernity can be traced through works of fiction.²⁰ An important function of literature, and other forms of fiction, has been to explore challenges to mating, suggest solutions, and disseminate agreed-upon norms and values. This is a universal aspect of storytelling. Across cultures and time, communities have used fiction to impart on its members how to increase their status and attract a mate. Especially when transitioning between moralities, fiction can be central. In world literature's oldest extant work, *Gilgamesh* (c. 2000 BC),²¹ the protagonist's primary character flaw is his abusive mating practices, as he uses his royal power to have sex with his subjects' brides. The main imperative of antiquity's heroic love was that “a woman *had* to love the best warrior, even if he had killed her father or husband.”²² This ideology justified the rape and capture of female nonkin, such as when the Vikings pillaged their way through Europe. *Gilgamesh* does not oppose this ancient rape culture but suggests restricting its applicability. The epic poem promotes the ideal that even kings should not force themselves on female in-group members. Three more millennia would pass before courtly love posited that it was unheroic for men to rape and hoard women, thus sanctifying female consent and monogamy.

New moralities have driven innovation in fictional formats as content and form have coevolved. Courtly love was disseminated through the medieval romance, which I investigate in Chapter 2. Another new format—the

modern novel—responded to the next momentous change in Western mating, the Second Sexual Revolution of the mid-eighteenth century. The feudal transition had transferred authority in matters of mating from one patriarchal structure to another: from the kin group to the family. Although individuals gained increasing influence, until the eighteenth century, parents arranged most marriages.²³ By then, Western psychology had become so individualistic that a rapidly increasing number of young people felt entitled to make their own mating decisions. For many women, the result was catastrophic. More premarital sex contributed to a doubling, tripling, or quadrupling of unwanted pregnancies across Northwestern Europe.²⁴ Higher-status men frequently seduced lower-class women with promises of marriage, then left them to deal with pregnancies on their own.²⁵ Instead of having parents arrange marriages of reason—in line with the ideals of companionate love²⁶—individuals more often let their emotions decide. Since evolution had instilled in females a strong bias for the most attractive males,²⁷ a mating regime of individual choice made women more vulnerable to the deception of the most compelling men. In Chapter 6, I study an example of how the modern novel warned women against predatory seducers.

The promise of universal self-determination inherent in the Second Sexual Revolution only became a reality after the Third Sexual Revolution of the 1960s, which I symbolically place in the culturally pivotal year of 1968. We could view the period 1750–1968 as the unfolding of one protracted revolution of individual choice. This process was no straight march toward the goal, but ebbed and flowed as its ideology and environment coevolved. In the late eighteenth century, libertine love played a similarly transitional role as courtly love had done in the Middle Ages. I refer to these two mating ideologies as *cultural dissolvents*. Those who embraced these high-arousal moralities could not build social orders on them. The function of courtly love was primarily to counter heroic love, as companionate love came to inform most people's mating. Libertine love fulfilled its function by undermining the pragmatism of companionate love. Once this purpose was achieved, romantic love reattached copulation to pair-bonding, which contributed to a reduction in illegitimate births from the 1850s on.²⁸ In the 1960s, post-World War II prosperity and the contraceptive pill finally made it possible to universalize individual choice without many of the negative externalities that previous generations would have suffered. This radically novel environment facilitated that confluent love—which had been debated in Nordic fiction since 1839²⁹—became the hegemonic truth in matters of mating.

Romantic love typically had conceptualized men and women as incomplete halves who became whole through a pair-bond meant to last for life. Sex was only justified within a heterosexual relationship of deep emotions. Confluent love empowered people to give in to a wider range of erotic and romantic

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impulses. This ideology promotes that we should pair-bond only for as long as both parties benefit emotionally or materially, then move on to singledom or a new relationship (confluence: come together).³⁰ Singles are expected to engage in uncommitted copulation, as sex is seen as entertainment and an important source of well-being. Social historian Edward Shorter wrote, a bit hyperbolically, that the Third Sexual Revolution was about “the hard sexual core, thinking eroticism most precious in what human relationships have to offer.”³¹ Both with regard to copulation and pair-bonds, confluent love sanctifies convenience, reward, and individualistic self-realization.

Empowering individuals to follow their emotions undid millennia of cultural adaptations to the agricultural lifestyle. Westerners returned to the mating for which *Homo sapiens* had evolved: serial pair-bonding interspersed with opportunistic, short-term relationships.³² Our hunter-gatherer ancestors had lived more freely—erotically and romantically—than our agricultural ones. Forager couples seem typically to have pair-bonded until their offspring was old enough to progress to communal rearing within the forager band. With the hunter-gatherer mating cycle being around 3–4 years, feelings of love needed not last longer. The agricultural age had imposed stricter demands. Since fields could not be split up and carried away in cases of divorce, farmers were incentivized to submit to the ideal of lifelong pair-bonding.³³

Male and Female Marginalization on Modern Mating Markets

No longer bound to fields and able to afford divorce, twentieth-century Westerners returned to serial monogamy. Effective contraceptives ushered in a golden age for uncommitted copulation, especially for the most attractive men. The top percentile of men now report having had over a hundred sex partners.³⁴ In the same neoliberal period during which freer markets drove economic stratification, similar dynamics drove mating stratification. The least attractive men are increasingly excluded from sex, relationships, and fatherhood. In our present century, past-year sexual inactivity among young American men has risen to 31%.³⁵ One survey indicated that virginity among men under age 30 has risen to around 27%.³⁶ Norwegian men with high salaries have a 90% chance of being pair-bonded by age 40—those with low salaries, a 40% chance.³⁷ As women share high-value men in temporal succession, an increasing number of low-value men are prevented from having children.³⁸ From 1985 to 2012, the number of Norwegian men who failed to reproduce by age 45 increased from 14% to 23%.³⁹ Three times as many men as women suffer involuntary childlessness.⁴⁰

Such male marginalization has complex causes.⁴¹ One is that most Western women are no longer materially or morally dependent on being in a relationship. For around 4 million years—through forager, agricultural,

and industrial phases—females were strongly incentivized to pair-bond with someone willing to provide for her and her children. David Buss, one of the founders of evolutionary psychology, emphasizes that, especially in the Nordic countries, women now have fewer material incentives to marry. With long maternity leave, subsidized daycare, and other forms of support, “taxpayers effectively provide women with what partners otherwise would.”⁴² Such economic freedom—in combination with gender equality, adherence to confluent love, and hypercompetitive dating markets—influences women to increasingly channel mating opportunities to the top 5% of men, a group whose access to new sex partners has increased by 32%. The same American study showed an equivalent reduction in sex partners among the men at the bottom.⁴³

Women discriminate between men more strongly because the modern environment empowers them to do so. After eons of patriarchal interference, Western females have regained the power of sexual selection.⁴⁴ They are in a situation evocative of that of their early hominin forebears, who probably mated promiscuously, which motivated hominin females to channel reproductive opportunities mostly to the highest-status males. That was more than 4 million years ago. Since then, pair-bonding has shaped our psychologies in a way that makes promiscuous mating less fulfilling, especially for women.⁴⁵ Humans generally desire relationships and tend to be happier when coupled up.⁴⁶ Twenty-first-century women in the West may have gained practically unlimited sexual access to the most attractive men through digital and urban dating markets, but this has not been an unmitigated boon.

After dating apps were introduced, there was an increase in the proportion of men who suffered sexual inactivity, but women kept having sex at previous levels.⁴⁷ This seems no longer to be the case. One study found that in the 2020s, past-year sexual inactivity among American women increased to 32%.⁴⁸ Considering the ease with which women can attract sex partners online,⁴⁹ this sudden rise in female sexlessness seems to signal a deep discontent with modern mating. In recent years, female scholars and intellectuals have begun speaking out against the adverse consequences of the post-1968 mating regime.⁵⁰ The Third Sexual Revolution was meant to free both sexes from cultural oppression so that they could live out their innate desires. Instead, an increasing number of men and women are withdrawing from mating altogether: 57% of single Americans report not being interested in short- or long-term mating (casual sex and relationships, respectively).⁵¹ The process toward pair-bonding that began around 4 million years ago is being reversed. In Norway, the proportion of people not in established relationships has increased to 33%.⁵² American studies attest to a similar decoupling.⁵³ In Chapter 10, I investigate the social and psychological mechanisms that contribute to a growing number of involuntary celibate men (*incels*) and involuntary single women (*insings*).⁵⁴

An Evolutionary Perspective on Mating

Central authors of the late-nineteenth-century literary movement *the Modern Breakthrough* prophesied how a post-romantic-love mating regime would center on serial pair-bonding and uncommitted copulation. Henrik Ibsen, Amalie Skram, August Strindberg, and other Scandinavian authors applied Darwinian perspectives to discern humanity's mating nature. In Chapter 7, I show how these artists' understanding of humans as evolved animals helped them see through the delusions of romantic love. To investigate the negative externalities of confluent love—and the evolution of modern mating moralities—it is imperative that also I incorporate evolutionary perspectives. Humans are cultural beings, but our cultures build on biological predispositions; there are limits to how far human thought and behavior can be manipulated by ideology.⁵⁵ That is not to say that biological determinism governs human destiny. Although I enrich my study with findings from the evolutionary sciences, my approach stands in opposition to the misguided interpretations of the social Darwinists who, in the late 1800s and early 1900s, wreaked cultural havoc.⁵⁶ A perspective of *biocultural coevolution* gives appropriate attention to the complex interactions between human nature and culture.⁵⁷

Such an approach is especially useful with regard to mating, as reproduction is the pivotal evolutionary practice. In the next section, I offer a journey through 6 million years of hominin mating to offer insights into how male and female mate preferences evolved and how these have informed changing social orders. This exploration takes us up to the Viking Age (750–1050), which seems to have been triggered by how elite woman-hoarding had deprived low-status men of mating. Recent evolutionary scholarship conceptualizes the early Vikings as murderous incels.⁵⁸ The Viking Age ends after all the Norse⁵⁹—or almost all—submit to European normalcy. The last Germanic tribe fled to Iceland to continue to live in a kinship society, leaving a testament to their centuries-long transition to feudalism in their medieval world literature, the sagas. In Chapter 1, I examine how these thirteenth-century stories—while partly glorifying the Vikings—argue against the imperatives of heroic love.

In each chapter, I employ evolutionary perspectives to analyze one or more works of fiction to investigate a particular phase of the Western progression toward modern mating. I select made-up stories as my subject matter for several reasons. There exists no monolithic version of courtly love or the other mating moralities. The terms I use broadly define large cultural movements within which existed a diversity of creeds that evolved across time. Figure I.1 offers no final truth on the evolution of Western mating; its typology is primarily meant to have heuristic value. Within this framework, I situate my ten evolutionary literary criticisms. Ideologies of love are abstract entities of which we can speak only broadly. The ideology imbued in a work of fiction we can study in detail. In Chapter 2,

I investigate the functions of courtly love through analyzing one author's distinct understanding of this ideology as it expresses itself in *Tristrams saga* (1226). In Chapter 6, I analyze Emilie Flygare-Carlén's version of romantic love, as she understood this ideology in the early 1840s.

This local and temporal specificity grounds my investigation of Western love. All of my case studies were composed by authors who conceptualized and dealt with their community's specific challenges regarding copulation and pair-bonding. My analysis of their works illustrates how central literature and other forms of storytelling have been for the evolution of mating. This approach allows me not only to investigate the progression of Western mating—as experienced in a distinct cultural region—but to deepen our understanding of central literary works and movements. For instance, I show in Chapter 4 how a proper conceptualization of the stakes of the eighteenth century compels us to revalue Scandinavia's premier Enlightenment figure, Ludvig Holberg, both in terms of his imaginative character as a playwright and originality as a thinker. Similarly, positioning Carl Michael Bellman—the Shakespeare and Mozart of drinking songs—at the eruption of the Second Sexual Revolution opens our eyes to his profound social engagement and helps us contextualize his concern for female suffering.

Nordic literary history offers excellent case studies. From the sagas to our present era's novels and TV series, the relationship between the sexes and their mating practices has inspired groundbreaking, influential stories. As my presentation of case studies at the end of this chapter shows, certain works and literary movements uniquely illuminate the evolution of Western mating. Another factor that makes me focus on the Nordic region is that these countries have led the world in gender equality.⁶⁰ Their use of literature to explore uncharted mating territory has resulted in a trove of insightful works. Had I chosen fiction from a variety of regions, I could more distinctively have illustrated cross-culturally universal mechanisms but not narrative continuity. By selecting works from one culturally integrated part of the world, I show how communities build on previous beliefs and debates when they discuss the present and negotiate the future. This approach illustrates the utility of knowing our past. Through the next ten chapters, my journey through fiction offers access to the mental worlds of those who struggled with ideological transitions evocative of the ones we face today. By investigating how a starting point of heroic love evolved to become today's confluent love, we gain a deeper understanding of how our present era's mating dysfunction came to be and how our ancestors overcame challenges similar to ours.

Promiscuous, Polygynous, and Monogamous Mating

Around 6 million years ago, our last common ancestor with chimpanzees probably lived in groups of males and females who mated

promiscuously.⁶¹ Pair-bonding is practiced by 29% of primate species, but since chimps and bonobos are not among these, neither was probably our last common ancestor. There have been relatively few transitions away from pair-bonding once it has evolved.⁶² In promiscuous regimes, the male mostly contributes sperm, while the female cares for the offspring. Individuals are free to copulate, but high-status males are favored for reproduction.⁶³ Such an alliance between females and high-status males is the most common reproductive strategy for vertebrates. By selecting males who outcompete others, females spread through the population whichever genes are more functional in a certain environment. The hominin starting point thus instilled in females an attraction to the most successful males.

Over the next millions of years, a second attraction system evolved as biparental care and pair-bonding coevolved with a growing period of offspring dependence. Ecological changes enhanced the benefit of parental cooperation.⁶⁴ Access to energy-rich, hard-to-get food made male provisioning an increasingly beneficial strategy.⁶⁵ The leading hypothesis is that superior males became less promiscuous, instead keeping harems to secure that the females they provided for did not get pregnant with other males.⁶⁶ Parents cooperating to keep infants alive contributed to how, across eons, feelings evolved that motivated relationships evocative of those humans have today.⁶⁷ Like many other pair-bonding species, hominins developed a neurobiological capacity for selective social attachment facilitated by mesolimbic dopamine pathways and social neuropeptides like oxytocin and vasopressin—or expressed more simply, they began to love each other.⁶⁸ This transition to polygynous mating offered females copulation with successful males as well as their paternal investment.

As our increasingly brainy ancestors required more calories, each individual needed a larger area to forage, causing females to be more spread out.⁶⁹ This was one of several ecological pressures that likely drove the transition from polygyny to monogamy, as it became too costly to guard and provide for a multitude of females and their offspring. A male could only defend so much territory, and if this area could provide but for one nuclear family, polygyny was no longer a viable strategy. Concurrently, new tools and weapons equalized differences in strength, allowing inferior males more effectively to challenge mate-hoarders.⁷⁰ Judging by canines and sexual dimorphism,⁷¹ by the emergence of the genus *Homo* around 2 million years ago, monogamous pair-bonds had become the norm. We do not know for how many million years hominins predominantly mated under a polygynous regime, but this originary period instilled in females a bias for pair-bonding with superior males (Figure I.2).

An alternative hypothesis is that the transition to pair-bonding was driven by low-status males changing their courting strategy and female

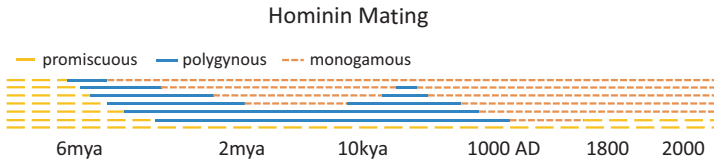


Figure 1.2 A possible evolution of mating practices. Global pattern from 6 million years ago until the Middle Ages, then Western.⁷²

responses to such innovation. Theoretical biologist Sergey Gavrilets rejects the notion that pair-bonding could have evolved as a result of high-status males' provisioning or mate guarding. Promiscuous breeding would have remained more profitable in terms of leaving a large genetic legacy.⁷³ Gavrilets proposes that low-status males took advantage of a niche that opened up as the development period of offspring grew, doubling over the past 4 million years.⁷⁴ By offering resources in return for sexual access and exclusivity, previously marginalized males could increasingly outcompete dominant males only willing to copulate. Females faced a trade-off. They could mate with those males to whom their ancestors' promiscuous past had made them affectively drawn—or select less compelling males willing to be generous. From this perspective, romantic love—our second attraction system, an addition to the promiscuous one—evolved to motivate females to have sex also with lower-value males. Thus, male provisioning and female fidelity coevolved in a self-reinforcing manner. Eventually, only very elite males would benefit from a promiscuous strategy. Gavrilets predicts that it would not make sense for females to exclusively pair-bond, as the genes of a superior male could trump access to the resources of a lower-status male.

This process of hominin self-domestication played itself out over millions of years, until *Homo* communities comprised pairs of provisioning males and largely faithful females, in addition to a small number of polygynists and promiscuous maters. Although monogamous pair-bonds became the *Homo* norm, having two attraction systems left our hearts divided—to put it a bit poetically. A male bias for polygyny and promiscuity seems not to have been selected against.⁷⁵ Male foragers may have had limited capacity for accumulating females but faced little pressure for not wanting to do so. Similarly, females concluded that provisioning low-status males mostly offered the better deal, but faced little pressure for not desiring a higher-status mate. Women too retained a bias for polygyny in certain environments, as it can be more adaptive to be the second wife or fourth concubine of a man with abundant resources rather than have exclusive access to a man who struggles to feed his family.⁷⁶ After the spread of agriculture, these biases expressed themselves in, at times, extreme woman-hoarding.

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The ethnographic record shows that around 90% of hunter–gatherer societies practiced polygyny, but elite foragers can rarely provide for more than four wives.⁷⁷ Agricultural surpluses and large herds allowed powerful men to build harems that made their elite Great Ape ancestors seem prudish.⁷⁸

Farming transformed mating, facilitating high levels of polygyny and incentivizing life-long pair-bonds. Once the best agricultural land was taken, a new, seemingly bizarre mating regime transformed the world. A 2015 study of ancient DNA shocked scientists.⁷⁹ From 7000 to 5000 years ago, Y chromosome diversity diminished by 95%. While female gene diversity increased in line with the population growth, 19 of 20 males disappeared from the genetic record. The researchers thought extreme levels of polygyny were to blame. Early agriculturalist patriarchs might simply have hoarded all the available women, and this became the uniform practice everywhere agriculture took hold. The DNA record suggested that in the most iniquitous environments, the male-to-female breeding ratio was 1:17. To achieve such numbers—knowing *Homo sapiens*' propensity for clandestine extrapair copulation—the patriarch would have had to castrate pretty much every other male.

What we know about human psychology and social organization makes this hypothesis implausible. Such a regime would be very unstable. Non-breeding men would be strongly incentivized to revolt. It would also not make evolutionary sense for the patriarch to castrate males in the next generation, perhaps all of whom would be his sons. In 2018, a new main hypothesis was established, one that reflects no more pleasantly on *Homo sapiens*' mating propensities.⁸⁰ Farming had not only changed how we mated, but dramatically increased our populations. With no more land to break, a kin group's most obvious means for continued growth was to conquer neighboring fields. For two millennia, the hegemonic practice seems to have been intertribal warfare with systematic annihilation, or castration, of every defeated male, followed by impregnation of the conquered females. Those kin groups who refrained from, or failed at, such practices mostly had their Y chromosomes wiped from the genetic record.⁸¹

After two millennia of embracing a mating morality that justified universal genocide and rape, our agriculturalist forebears transitioned to new beliefs. They convinced themselves that some men were so divine that even nonkin should submit to their leadership.⁸² Such ideology made possible social organization at a higher level than the kin group, which was a competitive strategy. Y chromosome diversity grew. Instead of murdering all nonrelated males, defeated men could be kept as slaves, or turned into allies. Adding levels of social complexity increased the size of warring groups where such organization took hold, but the kin group remained the dominant social unit. This epoch's heroic love justified that men continue to impregnate conquered women to grow their tribe, as patriarchal

ideology emphasized the male bloodline. Through this era of rampant warfare and intertribal raiding, women had to be prepared—if they wanted a chance to live and protect their children—to submit sexually and socially to their husband’s murderer or his allies. Skeletal remains attest to this rape culture. David Buss writes that in graves after war, there is “a striking absence of skeletons of reproductive-age females.” Written and other cross-cultural evidence substantiate that these women “were captured forcibly during warfare for sexual or marital ends.”⁸³

Tales of Love from Vikings to Tinder

From our present perspective, it is challenging to relate to how our tribal ancestors mated. This has been the case since medieval times. In Chapter 1, I investigate how Icelandic saga authors critically engage with their ancestors’ mating practices. The sagas partly aggrandize the violent heroics of pre-Christian Norsemen. Some authors even cede that the sexual practices promoted by heroic love could appeal to male psychology. There is some mention of polygyny and sexual slavery, but with such low frequency, and often in a tone so apologetic, that it comes across as whitewashing. Both with regard to violence and mating, their ancestors’ behaviors are portrayed to belong in a bygone era. I identify a narrative device that discourages practices related to polygynous mating. Several authors use their saga’s very structure to promote a monogamy-aligned bachelor phase. Successful Vikings would have been incentivized to spend decades pursuing additional mates. Their fictional counterparts are given only a few years to amass wealth and status before they must settle down and marry one woman for life. Those who extend their bachelor phase are severely punished. Many sagas portray as antisocial the men who prefer adventure and brotherhood rather than submit to the feudal ideal of lifelong monogamy.

The Icelandic sagas I study argue against heroic love but not for courtly love. To convince his aristocratic warriors of the immorality of raping their enemies’ women, King Hákon of Norway commissioned a Norse version of the Tristan legend. *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar* (1226)⁸⁴ is the only extant complete version from the formative period of the courtly branch of the romance of Tristan and Iseult, “the quintessential love story of the Middle Ages.”⁸⁵ My interpretation of this unique work attests to the coevolution of mating and modernity. Courtly love functioned as a bridge between mating regimes but also promoted the main social ideals that would come to define WEIRD cultures (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic).⁸⁶ Kinship societies had been undergirded by interpersonal trust among relatives. To thrive, feudal Europe required impersonal trust among strangers united by the Christian master-narrative. Tristram, the courtly knight, prospers because he embodies the impersonal prosociality⁸⁷ of the

new mobile, educated, and transculturally inclusive European individual.⁸⁸ I argue that his demise primarily should be understood as punishment for having had multiple mates.

The Unfaithful Wife (*Den utro hustru*, c. 1500)⁸⁹ offers an exceptional perspective on the pragmatism of companionate love. The school play combines humanistic storytelling with fifteenth-century sexual permissiveness, a convergence that only occurred in Scandinavia. The region's sole Shrovetide farce that survived post-Reformation book burnings conveys how marginalized apprentices experienced the era's mating markets. A defining feature of postkinship-society mating was the European Marriage Pattern (EMP) and its *nuptial valve*. No longer living in kin groups, most young people had to accumulate resources before they could acquire their own independent households. Women's marriage age was thus pushed up to the late 20s.⁹⁰ A shorter reproductive period helped Europeans avoid Malthusian crises,⁹¹ but it relegated youth to more than a decade of postpuberty celibacy. Such a restriction aligns poorly with human nature. To the low-status men hoping to participate in the looser sex culture of the post-Plague era, the anonymous playwright conveys that courtly love offers poor guidance. It is a myth that a true love awaits you, as the distribution of mating opportunities is informed by status. The play's narrative sympathizes with the plight of urban incels, but encourages them to be patient and accept the imperatives of the EMP. Through connecting short-term mating to witchcraft, *The Unfaithful Wife* portrays as antisocial those who seek anything but a lifelong pair-bond.

Ludvig Holberg founded modern Scandinavian drama with comedies that are still among the region's most beloved. Reading these in the context of the Second Sexual Revolution reveals that Holberg—contrary to common criticism—was not an unoriginal thinker and playwright. By situating his works at the tail end of the EMP, I show Holberg's remarkable prescience with regard to modern mating. From 1722 on, he dramatized the new morality of individual choice that was spearheaded by domestic servants, the largest group deprived of mating by the EMP. His plays support the emerging ideology of romantic love but warn against the pitfalls Holberg thought would manifest themselves after the upcoming revolution. He anticipates that market logic applied to gender relations will motivate a further moral transformation to an ideology evocative of confluent love. Affluent people becoming more drawn to mate with each other would worsen economic inequalities, he predicted, which would further a process of marginalization that would disincentivize reproduction.

Carl Michael Bellman has been praised as Scandinavia's greatest poet.⁹² His songs have been compared to the literature of Shakespeare and Dickens and the paintings of Hogarth and Rembrandt. His English-standard

biographer calls him “the Mozart of Swedish poetry” and “the greatest of all song-writers, in any language.”⁹³ With his *magnus opus*, *Fredman's Epistles* (*Fredmans epistlar*, 1790),⁹⁴ Bellman transformed drinking songs into world literature. These remain among Sweden's most cherished songs, but their sanctification of uncommitted sex and devaluation of marriage have puzzled critics. The majority of the 82 epistles were written in 1770–1772, just as the Second Sexual Revolution reached Scandinavia.⁹⁵ I argue that Bellman's masterpiece offers more illuminating insights into the transitional ideology of libertine love than any other artistic work. His early epistles portray sex as such a wonderful source of intoxication that individuals should have the right to copulate irrespective of social implications. Later epistles center on the horrific consequences this ideology would have for women. After 20 years of composition, Bellman retires his libertine ethos in a manner that points toward the romantic one that would supersede it.

Emilie Flygare-Carlén was probably Sweden's best-selling nineteenth-century novelist, home and abroad. Her more than 20 novels scrutinize mating from a perspective that later critics found too conservative, conveyed through formats that were too commercial. Her strong suit was the psychological depth with which she engaged her era's negotiation between mating moralities. In *The Magic Goblet* (*Kyrkoinvigningen i Hammarby*, 1840–1841),⁹⁶ Flygare-Carlén shows how the hegemonic creed of romantic love makes socially subjugated women vulnerable to predatory seducers. The Romantics' idealization of deep emotion contributed to fewer unwanted pregnancies but compelled women to obsess with the small number of men who are capable of arousing the strongest erotic and romantic affect. This Gothic romance's Don Juan-like hero-villain has a personality marked by *Dark Triad traits*, a combination of narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism.⁹⁷ Such men's antisocial deception is easier to get away with on modernity's large, mobile mating markets. *The Magic Goblet* conveys why these men come across as so irresistible, especially within a mating regime that portrays emotion as truth.

The Modern Breakthrough was Scandinavia's greatest contribution to world literature since the sagas. When *A Doll's House* (*Et dukkehjem*, 1879)⁹⁸ ends with “the door slam heard round the world,” Nora shuts the door on romantic love. She embraces a core imperative of confluent love: individualistic self-realization. Henrik Ibsen became the father of modern drama, and Nora abandoning her family became the inflection point for a literary contestation over tomorrow's mating morality. Inspired by the era's Darwinism, the men and women of the Modern Breakthrough sought to uncover the reality of *Homo sapiens'* evolved mating nature. Each interpreted Darwin to fit their own agenda, suggesting naturalistic understandings of “free love” and “true marriage,” some of which were laughable while others landed authors in prison. My investigation of their works

reveals that the most prescient author was Hans Jæger, “the rabid dog” of the Kristiania Bohemians and the most infamous man of the Modern Breakthrough.

After Nora slammed the door to transform herself into what would be termed the *New Woman*, what should men do? Romantic love had portrayed the sexes as complementary halves who should merge into a whole and self-realize through the breadwinner-housewife model. Hjalmar Söderberg’s oeuvre explores who the *New Man* should be as a response to women’s legal, sexual, and existential empowerment. *The Serious Game* (*Den allvarsamma leken*, 1912),⁹⁹ famously praised as Sweden’s only important love novel, centers on how the transition toward confluent love triggers a crisis for women, whose response compels also men to search for a new identity. Söderberg offers insights into why confluent love contributes to singledom and promiscuity while disincentivizing reproduction. I analyze three film adaptations (1945, 1977, and 2016) and one parallel novel (1973), which explore the consequences of this new mating ideology as it transforms modern Sweden.¹⁰⁰

Confluent love opened up for the social acceptance of gay love. Much queer literature employed this ideology to argue for the equality—or even supremacy—of same-sex eroticism and romance. With compatibility replacing complementariness as the highest partner ideal, mating with someone of the same sex came to break less with mainstream ideology. Building on the queer tradition, Sofi Oksanen, Finland’s most accomplished living author,¹⁰¹ stages a further evolution of mating morality. She imbues *Baby Jane* (2005)¹⁰² with what I term *lesbian heroic love*, a seemingly supremacist ethos which inverts antiquity’s patriarchal mating ideology. The novel’s protagonist couple dehumanize heterosexual men to justify their own economic exploitation of them. I argue that Oksanen seeks not to promote female or queer supremacy. She indicts how our era’s increasing marketization of mating motivates people, straight and queer, to exploit each other in a manner that reduces human well-being. I view *Baby Jane*’s queer ideology not to offer a moral foundation for a new social order; it functions as a cultural dissolvent meant to undermine people’s belief in confluent love. The purpose behind this dystopian novel seems to be to open up for more functional mating in the twenty-first century.

Certain groups of men and women are increasingly marginalized on today’s mating markets. Through juxtaposing a Norwegian TV series with a Swedish novel, I compare the distinct challenges faced by the sexes. *Sigurd Can’t Get Laid* (*Sigurd fäkke pult*, 2020–2022)¹⁰³ turns into cringe comedy how hypercompetitive mating markets relegate men with the lowest mate value to involuntary celibacy (incels). Amanda Romare’s partly autobiographical *Half of Malmö Consists of Guys Who Dumped Me* (*Halva Malmö består av killar som dumpat mig*, 2021)¹⁰⁴ dramatizes the adverse

consequences some women suffer as a result of having practically unlimited access to serial dating and casual sex with the most attractive men. Being able to select from an abundance of higher-value men on short-term markets can leave some women unable to calibrate their long-term mating strategies. Emotional mismatch, conflicting desires, and the economics of dating apps contribute to how an increasing number of women are relegated to involuntary singledom (insings). These two fictional works offer insights into why an alarming number of youths are opting out of both long- and short-term mating.¹⁰⁵ The TV series suggests that the solution is that men better themselves. The novel argues that dating technologies like Tinder have trapped the sexes, in particular women, in an inescapable “shit barrel” of addiction and exploitation. To progress past the contemporary debate of “men vs. women” with regard to victimization, I use these fictional case studies to dissect power differentials on short- and long-term markets.

In the Conclusion chapter, I sum up the insights gleaned through this 800-year journey through fiction, suggesting how these inform our present-day malaise. The First Sexual Revolution set everything in motion, but the pivotal change was the Second Sexual Revolution granting the highest authority in matters of mating to individuals. Young *Homo sapiens* have generally not been free to choose their own mates. Parental meddling, to various extents, was a human universal.¹⁰⁶ Today’s dysfunction stems from Western societies not having found the norms and values that could reconcile individual choice with communal needs. The utopia of confluent love was that freeing women and men from cultural oppression would allow them to live out their desires, which would increase human well-being and underpin better societies. After more than half a century’s hegemony, this mating regime seems now to be peaking, similar to how the romantic regime peaked in the 1950s. Like people did then, we are discovering that the utopia of our mating morality is precisely that, a utopia, one that will not deliver on its promise.

When our cultural beliefs have played themselves out, it is typically time to unite around new ones. I end by sharing how a handful of Nordic sci-fi narratives envision the future of mating. These tales attest to why our era’s Fourth Industrial Revolution is likely to bring about a Fourth Sexual Revolution, one of artificially intelligent sex robots, AI-driven matching services, and gene-edited reproduction, just to mention a few predicted innovations. I argue for why tomorrow’s mating ideology might be conceptualized as *dataist love*. Such a morality would transfer authority in matters of mating from human individuals to a machine that is meant to understand our emotions better than we do. I place the emergence of dataist love symbolically in the year 2029. As with all the ideological transitions in this study, the Fourth Sexual Revolution will build on millions of years of biological evolution and millennia of cultural adaptations. If we

gain a better understanding of how today's beliefs and practices came to be, this could contribute to a more productive process as we develop a new ideology of love, one more fit for tomorrow's environment, and hopefully with a higher chance of contributing to good lives for more people.

Notes

- 1 Stein Emil Vollset et al., "Fertility, Mortality, Migration, and Population Scenarios for 195 Countries and Territories from 2017 to 2100: A Forecasting Analysis for the Global Burden of Disease Study," *Lancet* 396.10258 (2020): 1285–306. By 2100, 23 countries are predicted to have their population reduced by 50% or more—another 34 countries, by 25–50%. By 2050, more than 150 countries are predicted no longer to be reproducing their numbers.
- 2 Statistics Korea, cited by Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/south-koreas-fertility-rate-dropped-fresh-record-low-2023-2024-02-28/>. A fertility rate of 2.1 children per woman is required to maintain a broadly stable population.
- 3 An aging population results in fewer workers having to support a growing number of pensioners. A researcher warns, "It's incredibly hard to think this through and recognize how big a thing this is; it's extraordinary, we'll have to reorganize societies"; James Gallagher, "Fertility Rate: 'Jaw-Dropping' Global Crash in Children Being Born," *BBC News*, July 15, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/health-53409521>. Elon Musk is among those who keep warning that "birth rate collapse is the biggest threat to human civilization," <https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1440742298518577156>.
- 4 William Sims Bainbridge, "Demographic Collapse," *Futures* 41.10 (2009): 738–45.
- 5 OECD Data, "Fertility Rates." Since 2010, Denmark's rate has dropped from 1.87 to 1.55, Finland's from 1.87 to 1.46, Iceland's from 2.20 to 1.82, Norway's from 1.95 to 1.41, and Sweden's from 1.98 to 1.67.
- 6 Ruth Weston and Robyn Parker, "Why Is the Fertility Rate Falling?: A Discussion of the Literature," *Family Matters* 63 (2002): 6–13; Jonathan Grant et al., "Trends in European Fertility: Should Europe Try to Increase its Fertility Rate...or Just Manage the Consequences?" *International Journal of Andrology* 29.1 (2006): 17–24; Amanda DeSantis, "Evolutionary Paradox: Women Choosing Not to Have Children," in Todd K. Shackelford and Viviana A. Weekes-Shackelford, eds., *Encyclopedia of Evolutionary Psychological Science* (New York: Springer Nature, 2021), 2741–7; Nicholas Eberstadt, "Can America Cope with Demographic Decline?" *National Review*, October 18, 2021, <https://www.nationalreview.com/magazine/2021/10/18/can-america-cope-with-demographic-decline/>.
- 7 Other terms for this concept are *mating morality* or *philosophy of love*.
- 8 I refer here to the universal human emotion of romantic love, which motivates people to pair-bond. At the end of this paragraph, I refer to the social ideology of romantic love, which was hegemonic in the West from the early 1800s to the 1960s. Throughout this study, when I use the term romantic love, I mostly refer to social ideology.
- 9 Hominin is a term for the human lineage that includes chimpanzees and bonobos, but not gorillas. Different definitions exist.
- 10 How I use these terms builds primarily on the works of Bjørn Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion: Love and Marriage in Old Norse Society* (Turnhout:

- Brespos, 2005); Roger Boase, *The Origin and Meaning of Courtly Love: A Critical Study of European Scholarship* (Rowman: Manchester University Press, 1977); Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992); Joseph Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World: How the West Became Psychologically Peculiar and Particularly Prosperous* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020); Richard A. Posner, *Sex and Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love 2: Courtly and Romantic* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love 3: Modern World* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987).
- 11 In pop culture, *the sexual revolution* refers to what transpired in the 1960s. Edward Shorter conceptualized the West to have had two sexual revolutions, the first around 1750 and the second around 1968; Edward Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1975). Newer research on the origins of modernity makes me add an earlier sexual revolution. With the Gregorian Reform (1050–1200), the Church established lifelong monogamy as the only acceptable frame for copulation and reproduction; William M. Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love: Longing and Sexuality in Europe, South Asia, and Japan, 900–1200 CE* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2012).
 - 12 I investigated the past millennium’s evolution of the Nordic master-narrative in a study similar to this; Mads Larsen, *Master-Narrative Transitions from the Vikings to A.I.: How Fiction Helps Communities Adapt to a Changing World* (under contract).
 - 13 Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, <https://www.oxfordlearners-dictionaries.com/definition/english/metanarrative>.
 - 14 Polygyny refers to one man mating with multiple females, a practice that has been common in the vast majority of human societies. Polyandry is one woman having multiple male mates, a practice only found in around 1% of human societies; George P. Murdock and Douglas R. White, “Standard Cross-Cultural Sample,” *Ethnology* 8.4 (1969): 329–69. Polyandry is typically practiced in ecologies so impoverished that brothers are incentivized to share a wife. The intention is often to do so only temporarily. In parts of Europe, the Church began dissolving tribes already in the first millennium; Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*; Nicholas A. Christakis, *Blueprint: The Evolutionary Origins of a Good Society* (New York: Little, Brown Spark, 2019), eBook.
 - 15 The consequences of the Church’s mating morality have been scrutinized by scholars from a variety of fields since 1965 when demographer John Hajnal pointed out “the striking contrast between marriage patterns in Western Europe and virtually every other part of the world”; Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order: From Prehuman Times to the French Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012), 230; John Hajnal, “European Marriage Patterns in Perspective,” in David V. Glass, and David Edward Charles Eversley, eds., *Population in History: Essays in Historical Demography* (Chicago: Aldine, 1965), 101–43.
 - 16 No longer protected by kin, Europeans submitted to feudal lords, who offered security in return for loyalty and labor. Monotheistic beliefs aligned with worldly organization under one ruler and one Church.
 - 17 Henrich refers to this process as the West’s *psychological-institutional coevolution*. Living in monogamous nuclear families changed people’s psychologies,

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which drove the development of new institutions, which further changed Western psychology, and so forth.

- 18 Not every powerful man—or all men of lesser status—submitted to lifelong monogamy. Especially royals, aristocrats, and other men of exceptional means often maintained sexual access to women besides their wife. But, compared to previous and other contemporary social orders, Europeans practiced an exceptional degree of monogamy.
- 19 Nicolas Baumard et al. propose a different order of causality. They posit that economic growth came first, driving Europeans to change their mating ideology and practices. Their study of fiction across four millennia shows that high economic growth drives a desire for romantic ideology—such as courtly love—that motivates greater investment in offspring through a sanctification of the pair-bond. Baumard et al. insist that the Church did not drive the transition away from heroic love, but adapted their doctrine to an ongoing cultural change. I read their rejection of institutional explanations to be a bit of a strawman. Henrich's concept of a psychological-institutional coevolution offers a richer explanation. See Nicolas Baumard et al., "The Cultural Evolution of Love in Literary History," *Nature Human Behaviour* 6.4 (2022): 506–22.
- 20 Mating can be seen as the foundational institution in the context of Henrich's psychological-institutional coevolution.
- 21 *Gilgamesh*, trans. Stephen Michell (London: Profile Books, 2004).
- 22 Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, 57.
- 23 In kinship societies, marriages were typically best understood as a commercial contract between families—not individuals. The Church introduced a rule of consent. This did not give individuals the right to choose their own spouse. Women could refuse their parents' choice, but a doctrine of double consent meant that parents in practice retained the greater influence.
- 24 Illegitimacy doubled in England while quadrupling in France and Germany; Wally Seccombe, *A Millennium of Family Change: Feudalism to Capitalism in Northwestern Europe* (London: Verso, 1992); Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005). In Stockholm, half of all childbirths were by unwed mothers; Eva Borgström, "Emilie Flygare-Carlén och 'äktenskapets politik,'" in Monica Lauritzen, ed., *En ros, ett år: Artiklar kring Emilie Flygare-Carlén* (Stockholm: Tre Böcker Förlag, 1994), 46–61.
- 25 Hanne Marie Johansen, "Marriage or Money? Legal Actions for Enforcement of Marriage Contracts in Norway," in Maria Ågren and Amy Louise Erickson, eds., *The Marital Economy in Scandinavia and Britain, 1400–1900* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 23–37.
- 26 I use Anthony Giddens's concept of companionate love, which is similar to that of Sternberg, Berscheid, and Walster. These latter ones approach forms of love as psychological phenomena while I investigate social ideology; Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*; Robert J. Sternberg, "A Triangular Theory of Love," *Psychological Review* 93 (1986): 119–35; Ellen Berscheid and Elaine Hatfield Walster, *Interpersonal Attraction* (Boston: Addison-Wesley, 1978).
- 27 David M. Buss and Michael Barnes, "Preferences in Human Mate Selection," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 50.3 (1986): 559–70; David P. Schmitt, "Fundamental Strategies of Human Mating," in David M. Buss, ed., *Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2005), 258–91; David Buss, *When Men Behave Badly: The Hidden Roots of Sexual Deception, Harassment, and Assault* (Boston: Little, Brown Book Group, 2021), eBook.

- 28 Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family*.
- 29 In the Nordic region, confluent love was first dramatized in what is Swedish literary history's perhaps most controversial novel: Carl J. L. Almqvist, *Det går an* (*Sara Videbeck*) (Stockholm: Hjerta, 1839).
- 30 Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*.
- 31 Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family*, 79.
- 32 Bernard Chapais, *Primeval Kinship: How Pair-Bonding Gave Birth to Human Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Joseph Henrich, Robert Boyd, and Peter J. Richerson, "The Puzzle of Monogamous Marriage," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series B, Biological Sciences* 367.1589 (2012): 657–69; Steven W. Gangestad and Nicholas M. Grebe, "Human Mating Systems," in Michael P. Muehlenbein, ed., *Basics in Human Evolution* (London: Academic Press, 2015), 467–78; Gil G. Rosenthal, *Mate Choice: The Evolution of Sexual Decision Making from Microbes to Humans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Schmitt, "Fundamental Strategies of Human Mating." Humans can combine long- and short-term relationships through "clandestine extrapair copulation," a term that refers to the practice of secretly having sex with others while in a pair-bond. For men, such infidelity gives an obvious evolutionary advantage, as a chance to make more women pregnant promotes the cheating man's genetic legacy. Women's primary motivation for infidelity seems to be to screen new men as potential long-term partners; Buss, *When Men Behave Badly*; David M. Buss and David P. Schmitt, "Mate Preferences and Their Behavioral Manifestations," *Annual Review of Psychology* 70 (2019): 77–110.
- 33 Helen Fisher, *Anatomy of Love: A Natural History of Mating, Marriage, and Why We Stray* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2016). Fisher writes that—in general—we cannot rely on intense feelings of love to motivate pair-bonding beyond around 3–4 years. She refers to "attachment" as a longer-term emotion, one of warmth and belonging that can motivate couples to stay together once feelings of lust and love have subsided.
- 34 Kirstin R. Mitchell et al., "Why Do Men Report More Opposite-Sex Sexual Partners Than Women? Analysis of the Gender Discrepancy in a British National Probability Survey," *The Journal of Sex Research* 56.1 (2019): 1–8; Nicholas H. Wolfinger, "Promiscuous America: Smart, Secular, and Somewhat Less Happy," *Institute for Family Studies*, April 18, 2018, <https://ifstudies.org/blog/promiscuous-america-smart-secular-and-somewhat-less-happy>.
- 35 Peter Ueda et al., "Trends in Frequency of Sexual Activity and Number of Sexual Partners Among Adults Aged 18 to 44 Years in the US, 2000–2018," *JAMA Network Open* 3 (2020): e203833.
- 36 Christopher Ingraham, "Young Male Virginity on the Rise," *Washington Post*, 2019, https://twitter.com/_cingraham/status/1111629177575350279.
- 37 Ingvild Almås et al., "The Economics of Hypergamy," *Journal of Human Resources* 58.1 (2023): 260–81.
- 38 An-Magritt Jensen and Lars Østby, "Stadig flere menn i Norge er barnløse," *Samfunnspeilet* 2 (2014): 20–23.
- 39 Bård Amundsen, "Én av fire menn får ikke barn," *Forskning*, May 8, 2014, <https://forskning.no/kjonn-og-samfunn-likestilling-sosiologi/n-av-fire-menn-far-ikke-barn/563682>.
- 40 Jarle Roheim Håkonsen and David Vojislav Krekling, "Dramatisk økning i andelen barnløse," *NRK*, November 1, 2017, <https://www.nrk.no/norge/dramatisk-okning-i-andelen-barnlose-i-norge-1.13759502>.

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1 Exiting Heroic Love

Monogamous Indoctrination in the Icelandic Sagas (1200s)

The Icelandic sagas try to instill in superior males a belief in the virtuousness of a sexually exclusive, lifelong relationship with one woman. In the preceding millennia, successful men had typically pursued new sex partners throughout their adult life, but a transforming Europe required dramatically different mating practices. *The Saga of Björn (Bjarnar saga Hítðœlakappa)*¹ offers an illuminating example of how communities use fiction to promote new ideals. Björn, the protagonist, is a highly capable teenager whose life looks promising but also perilous. He was fortunate to be born into Iceland's class of elite farmers. Björn is in love with Oddny, a girl with exceptionally high mate value, and she also loves him. But for their engagement to result in marriage, the young man must prove his mettle as a Viking in turn-of-the-millennium Europe. He is given precisely three years to amass the status and wealth necessary to position himself as an elite farmer worthy of a lifelong monogamous pair-bond with someone like Oddly. His saga, written around two centuries later, describes what transpires next.

Plausibly, a man named Björn was born around 989 and had a life trajectory similar to that which his saga turns into a captivating drama. But important aspects of Björn's reality would have been different from the one the saga author stages, especially with regard to mating. A generation after Björn's demise, the Church began a sweeping theological and legal transformation, the Gregorian Reform (1050–1200).² This regime, the West's First Sexual Revolution, let the Church seize power over marriages and people's sexual behavior. The clergy understood the foundational importance of mating. "Women embody the most important resource over which men compete," writes David Buss.³ Through wresting control over this domain, the Church gained leverage over powerful men. Europe's tribes were dissolved through the prohibition of cousin marriage and new rules for ownership and inheritance. Lifelong monogamy became the only acceptable frame for copulation and reproduction; not even the most superior of men should have any woman on the side. We do not know exactly

why the Church convinced itself of the sanctity of these historically unusual Marriage and Family Practices (MFPs), but the MFPs set in motion a *psychological-institutional coevolution* that underpinned modernity.⁴

As Church's MFPs broke so dramatically with the MFPs of previous epochs, it took centuries to convince populations to mate according to the new norms. In the next chapter, I investigate how medieval romances compelled Europeans to embrace a new sociality that included sophisticated courtship to elicit female consent. The Icelandic sagas of the thirteenth century offer something else: a critical engagement with antiquity's heroic love. Their narratives are firmly planted in the Norse kinship era, the Saga Age, which runs from the settlement of Iceland around 870 until around 1030, a generation after Iceland turned to Christendom. This barren island in the North Atlantic remained a European anomaly, a proto-democratic anarchy that resisted feudalism, so that the last Germanic tribe could continue to organize as kin groups.⁵ In the 1200s, the threat of all-out civil war incentivized Icelanders to join European normalcy, which they did in 1262 by accepting King Hákon of Norway as their feudal sovereign. Throughout this century, Icelanders turned their rich oral story tradition into world literature—prose in the vernacular written on calf skins.⁶ These stories helped them discuss whether to risk regressing toward their ancestors' Viking morality or complete their centuries-long transition to Christian feudalism.

Much scholarship has focused on the political and cultural aspects of this process.⁷ In this chapter, I investigate the mating aspects; more specifically, how the sagas engage the pivotal changes of the First Sexual Revolution.⁸ *The Saga of Björn* is not unique in centering its narrative on a bachelor period with a clear temporal restriction. Several young saga characters are given typically three years to demonstrate their superiority before lifelong monogamy awaits. The purpose of these waiting periods can be premarriage money-raising, glory amassment, the earning of a chieftainship, or to function as a time-out for berserks and other unmarried troublemakers. Commonly, if these men overextend their adventures, the narrative punishes them with death. The actual turn-of-the-millennium Norsemen would not have conceptualized bachelorhood as a distinct period of time meant to end in monogamy. Plausibly, the story of Björn—the accomplished Icelandic Viking—had been shaped by changing cultural preferences through two centuries of oral transmission. The Christian saga author used what was passed down as raw material for his own literary composition but, like other composers of sagas, felt that his version should promote Church MFPs.

But why would it be so central that young men promptly end the period during which they accumulate wealth and status? Could not the allotted three years just be a narrative device, a ticking clock that provides tension? In the following, I analyze a line of sagas which, I argue, attest to how it

was a paramount concern for saga authors to argue *against* their ancestors' MFPs—which had been justified by the ideology of heroic love—and *for* Church MFPs, primarily understood as lifelong monogamy commissioned by God. Today's critics mostly agree that the sagas' thematic arguments align with an embrace of feudalism.⁹ I will show how a universal adherence to this era's new mating practices—to restrain the woman-hoarding of powerful men—was understood as integral to the feudal transition.

All the King's Women

Polygyny has a math problem. When high-status men hoard wives, concubines,¹⁰ and sex slaves,¹¹ some, many, or all low-status men are left without mate prospects. The greater a society's proportion of such incels, the greater the risk for social instability. The ethnographic record shows a strong correlation between crime and a society's percentage of unmarried men. Polygynous societies suffer more rape, murder, theft, prostitution, and sexual slavery.¹² Mating stratification seems to have been strong in Late Iron Age Scandinavia. Viking archeologists Ben Raffield and Neil Price, and evolutionary anthropologist Mark Collard, conclude that the Viking Age (750–1050) likely was triggered by a dramatically skewed operational sex ratio, a term for the ratio of men and women available to mate.¹³ When new boat technology, weakened European powers, and other conditions permitted the raiding of Europe,¹⁴ Norse incels eagerly grabbed for their oars and swords to acquire the status and wealth necessary to qualify for the domestic marriage market—and while doing so, capture foreign women for short- and long-term mating.

To us moderns, such practices are atrocious, but many of our ancestors viewed raiding as a natural way of life. Even foragers are known to sometimes capture the women of neighboring tribes. Vikings and Mongols are mostly infamous for temporal reasons. Modern medievalists came to reject that the Viking Age was triggered by polygyny.¹⁵ Contemporary historians had not. Dudo of Saint-Quentin (c. 965–1043) wrote that an excess of unmarried men led to the Norse plundering of Europe.¹⁶ This was a common conclusion as late as with William Camden's sixteenth-century *Britannia*.¹⁷ In 1988, when Carol Clover explored the social consequences of the era's female shortage, she did so “emphatically not to suggest that the Viking Age came about because men went out looking for women.”¹⁸ Scholars have begun to study more judiciously the implications of antiquity's polygynous mating regimes. In 2008, James Barrett made a strong case for the Viking Age having been a result of “bands of ‘surplus’ young men (perhaps resulting from selective female infanticide) in need of bride-wealth.” He rejected the common explanations of “technological, climatic, or economic determinism . . . ‘overpopulation’ [and] the

lure of weak neighbors.”¹⁹ The findings of Raffield et al. support Barrett’s conclusions.

Björn, our Icelandic Viking, would have lived in an era when successful men were driven to accumulate women. For millions of years, male psychology had been shaped by how males with an appetite for polygyny left a larger genetic legacy than those content with—or only able to—breed with a single female, or no female at all. Björn lived late in the Viking Age, but contemporary sources attest to how Christian influence had not brought rapid changes in mating behavior. In the eleventh century, Adam of Bremen wrote that Swedish men had two or more wives, depending on the man’s means. Rich men and princes had many more.²⁰ In the previous century, Ibn Fadlan reported that a Rus Viking king kept 40 concubines to himself and rewarded his 400 personal warriors with two slave girls each. He described how the Vikings sold enslaved women primarily as sex objects.²¹ King Harald Fairhair (c. 850–932) had—according to his own saga—so many wives that he had to rid himself of nine of them. In addition, he had concubines.²² Ninth-century *Hrafnsmál* reports that King Harald rewarded his warriors with slave girls from the east.²³ Such *sexual hospitality* was a way for powerful men to regulate female sexuality so that it became a resource that could be drawn on when it was “politically useful to grant sexual access to female slaves or even family members.”²⁴

This patriarchal order had many and far-reaching consequences. Low-status males would be incentivized to take big risks to enter the mating market. Their zero-sum mentality would drive “greater violence and more crime.” High-status males were “motivated to shift [their] time and energy away from investing in [their] current wife and her children to instead apply it to obtaining additional wives.” In the later monogamous social order, such men would be

more likely to settle for smaller, incremental improvements in [their] status or wealth, and to apply these to investing in [their] current wife and children. Thus the evolutionary payoffs to status-climbing in polygynous societies are much greater than in monogamous societies, even for higher-status married men.²⁵

Capable men like Björn had not been incentivized to prove their mettle for a few years, then settle down with the best woman they could earn. They were evolutionarily, culturally, and psychologically incentivized to compete throughout their life for sexual access to new women. Such intramale competition affected individual and cultural psychology. The First Sexual Revolution would transform Western endocrinology, as “monogamous marriage suppresses men’s competitiveness, risk-taking, and revenge-seeking while increasing their impersonal trust and self-regulation.”²⁶

The sagas chronicle this interior transformation. Tellingly, in the high-testosterone environment of the Viking Age, crying was “not considered masculine.”²⁷ This was an ancient norm. In AD 98, Tacitus wrote that Germanic tribes “soon had done with tears and laments.”²⁸ In the 1070s, Adam von Bremen wrote that tears are “so much abominated that one may weep neither over his sins nor over his beloved dead.”²⁹ By the 1200s, Norse interiority had changed. The competitive pressure that the polygynous order had placed upon men came to be “imagined as something of a burden.”³⁰ Church MFPs had gained such influence that “the old type of masculinity is now coded as anti-social.”³¹ In a scene that reads as both odd and touching, the New Man of the First Sexual Revolution is inaugurated in *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* (*Laxdæla saga*), as Thorstein ends the cross-generational narrative by letting “the servant woman [see] the tears streaming from his eyes.”³²

Similar psychological transformations mark the final chapters of many sagas. *The Saga of Cormac the Skald* (*Kormáks saga*) lets its eponymous protagonist understand that the core tenet of heroic love—that the woman belongs to the greater warrior—should be abandoned. Kormak is in love with Steingerd, who is married but gets kidnapped by a Viking. When Kormak frees her by murdering the Viking, Steingerd’s husband offers her to Kormak since “he had pursued her like a man.” Steingerd proves herself to be a woman of the new age, as she refuses to “exchange one knife for another.”³³ Kormak accepts that his martial superiority does not entitle him to her love, but he remains incapable of adapting to a new morality. He returns to raiding, only to be murdered by a giant, a forest creature with a troll’s strength. Being killed by a pre-Christian monster seems a fitting end for a man whose morality is stuck in the same epoch.³⁴

The Saga of the Jomsvikings (*Jómsvíkinga saga*)³⁵ offers another transitional tale, one that dares convey how compelling the previous era’s mating regime must have been to aspects of male psychology. *Homo sapiens* did not evolve in monogamous nuclear families, each in their own abode. Brotherhood, risky adventures, and sexually conquering the women of non-kin were common aspects in the lives of many of our male ancestors. The way in which these practices are described early in the narrative can make *The Saga of the Jomsvikings* an uncomfortable read. The author adds an appropriately Christian ending, but we can imagine which parts of the narrative were more alluring during the centuries when this story was transmitted orally. Building on historical fact but with considerable imagination, the saga describes a fortified coastal base that fits 360 longships—an irresistible draw on bachelors from across the Norse world. In the Viking utopia of Jómshorg, bachelorhood does not last three years, as men keep raiding until they turn 50. Brotherhood is the new kinship, fear is not permitted, and looted goods are communal property. Church MFPs are

nowhere to be found. Women are prohibited inside the walls of Jónsborg, as they are sex objects to be captured, traded, and raped, not individuals with whom an ambitious man would choose to cohabit.

At first, Jónsborg shines like a beacon for innovative organization and heroic masculinity. High-status bachelors raise funds, or raid, to equip ships, then fill them with low-status bachelors. These crews show up at Jónsborg, where only those who pass strict tests are allowed to stay. Joining this Neverland of rape and plunder becomes the optimal way of increasing one's status. Even married men are drawn to the *borg*, craving another go at the bachelor lifestyle. The saga reads like kinship society porn. But, after the founder's passing, the fraternity falls into decline and is defeated. As the Jomsvikings are executed, a young man expresses no regret or worry, for he has already experienced "the best part of my life." His attitude attests to how important socialization is for the values and aspirations with which males enter into their bachelor phase. In polygynous societies, taking big risks for short-term gains is extra compelling compared to striving for incremental improvement. The resulting all-or-nothing mentality can make farming and monogamy seem inglorious. Readers are invited to share the young man's defeatist nostalgia, but then the most talented of the men are spared and brought into the fold of the new epoch, and "that is the end of the story of the Jomsvikings."³⁶

Women's Plight Under Polygyny

The attitude toward women expressed in *The Saga of the Jomsvikings* is perhaps more informative of what life was like for many women under polygynous regimes compared to the impression we are given from most other sagas. Some scholarship has portrayed the Viking Age as a time of relative female equality, which was later undermined by Christianity.³⁷ The earlier Iron Age has even been suggested as an era of female hegemony.³⁸ Literary historian Per Thomas Andersen concludes that Christianization cost Norse women most dearly.³⁹ Evolutionary theory applied to ethnographic data shows how naïve, in all likelihood, such notions are. Joseph Henrich offers strong evidence for how Christianity had the opposite effect in terms of gender equality.⁴⁰ The Church's sanctification of female consent set women on a path of empowerment that, almost a millennium later, is still ongoing (Figure I.1). Raffield et al. account for how polygyny and a shortage of females tend not to lead to women being empowered and viewed more positively, but to their commoditization.⁴¹ Henrich et al. substantiate how kinship society MFPs lead to negative attitudes toward women being socially legitimized.⁴² The strong, free Viking woman of myth may have existed in modest numbers, but most Norse females during this era "faced bleak prospects."⁴³ Raffield et al. conclude that with "the persistence of the

dubious and romanticized cliché of the ‘heroic’ Viking warrior, it is clear that the field would benefit from deeper studies of masculinity.”⁴⁴

The sagas rarely describe the grimmest realities of how the polygynous, pillaging Norse treated women. Some exceptions exist, like when *The Saga of the People of Laxardal* offers an apologetic account of sexual slavery. Hoskuld buys a woman from Gilli the Russian and “slept with the woman that same evening.” When Hoskuld returns to Iceland, his wife agrees to let the sex-trafficked woman live with them, but—adds the narrator—“Hoskuld slept with his wife every night after returning home and had little to do with his slave-woman.”⁴⁵ *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-Tongue* (*Gunnlaugs saga Ormstungu*) references infanticide, a practice that the Church prohibited. Thorstein tells Jofrid, “You are soon going to have a baby. Now if you have a girl, it must be left out to die, but if it is a boy, it will be brought up.”⁴⁶ Infanticide was disproportionately targeted at newborn girls.⁴⁷ Written records and grave findings suggest that men, up until the Middle Ages, outnumbered women to a significant extent.⁴⁸ The cross-cultural phenomenon of selective female infanticide seems to have been motivated by economic concern, as by restricting the childbearing pool, the population could be kept in check.⁴⁹

The resulting female shortage exacerbated the negative effect that polygyny had for the mating prospects of lower-status men.⁵⁰ Like their ancestors before them, Norse bachelors could not depend on entering into fatherhood. Human genetics show that we have twice as many female as male ancestors.⁵¹ Similar to the way in which the sagas whitewash how women were treated, they rarely focus on the plight of average men. Roberta Frank writes that the sagas can seem to portray a social order that benefits men, that the Saga Age was “a man’s world,” while discriminatory toward women.⁵² This impression stems from the narratives centering on men like Björn, representatives of the elite. Anthropological studies show that gender inequality and male control are likely to be greatest among the prosperous.⁵³ To conclude that a shortage of women legitimized “customs that upheld systems of male power” ignores the class aspect. To view all men as patriarchal beneficiaries under such a social order, write Raffield et al., “would be to marginalize the lives of the vast majority of men, at whose expense the elites thrived.”⁵⁴

These Norse incels seem to have met no more sympathy than what befalls the incels of our present era. In the evolutionary scheme of things, women are the more valuable sex, while men are more expendable.⁵⁵ Frank makes a point of how an Old Norse word for “bachelor” also meant “wretch.” By contrast, “the term used to designate an ‘unmarried woman’ had the basic meaning of ‘unlucky’.”⁵⁶ Such bachelor derision was likely informed by the *young male syndrome*, a term for the social havoc that results from having large numbers of unmarried men engage in crime and

exaggerated competition over women. In the thirteenth century, Icelanders seem to have been particularly preoccupied with this problematic. At a time when other European literatures had already begun to villainize “the evil, sex-demanding nature of women,” the sagas mostly made “the nearest bachelor” be the villain.⁵⁷ Frank adds,

The sagas all agree in representing courtship as the single most deadly pastime for the young Icelandic male . . . Romantic passion is pernicious in much medieval literature, but it is particularly fatal in the sagas, where love for a woman almost invariably leads to bloodshed or other misfortune.⁵⁸

The Norse experience with having a strongly skewed sex ratio, and the corresponding troubles likely to have been caused by unmarried low-status men, seems to have left a cultural stain on long bachelor periods. This history may partly explain why so many sagas discourage extended bachelorhood. Moreover, the fact that successful Vikings would have been incentivized to not settle down after only a few years of raiding might have contributed to a cultural memory that made their descendants harder to indoctrinate with regard to early, lifelong marriage. I propose that these influences could inform why several saga authors are so eager to villainize men who fail to marry at the time prescribed by their community.

The main function of the First Sexual Revolution was to distribute one woman to each man. Three groups had to be convinced of new norms and values for this strategy to work. High-status men had to resist the male bias for polygynous mating.⁵⁹ To aid with such a tall ask, exchanging Odin and Thor for the Christian almighty was pivotal. “Sincere belief in supernatural moralistic punishers,” writes Peter Turchin, “is particularly important because of the way it can restrain the powerful.”⁶⁰ The second group, women, had to resist their bias for the most attractive men. Being the concubine of a high-status man could be more adaptive than being the sole wife of an average man. For this reason, in *The Saga of the Jomsvikings*, a father is enthusiastic about his daughter’s illegitimate child with a king. Such calculations, writes Henrich, which can appear reasonable to individuals, can lead to social detriment:

Because of how monogamous marriage influences social dynamics and cultural evolution, inhibiting female choice—by prohibiting women from freely choosing to marry men who are already married—results in both women and children doing better in the long run (on average).⁶¹

This perspective brings our attention to how the Western exit from heroic love prevented more women from pair-bonding with men who had high

mate value. We can view this as a cost imposed on women, as their evolved mate preferences make them most affectively drawn to the highest-value men. After the First Sexual Revolution, women with low mate value had little choice but to marry similar-value men who previously had been excluded from mating. The resulting sexual egalitarianism was socially beneficial, but came at the cost of inhibiting female choice.⁶² In practice, Western women were similarly restricted in their mate selection until after the Third Sexual Revolution of the 1960s.

The third group that had to be convinced of the First Sexual Revolution's norms and values comprised the unmarried men themselves, who had to want to adopt a lifestyle that made them marriageable. No saga conveys this challenge more instructively than that of the quintessential bachelor "wretch," Grettir Ásmundarsonar. Like Björn, this superior warrior is also expected to settle down after amassing glory on the Norse mainland.

Monstrous Bachelor Berserks

In *Grettir's Saga* (*Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*),⁶³ the protagonist kills his first man at age 14. In modern literature, this would typically be a bad sign. In the sagas, such a violent capacity signals that this young man will become someone who matters. After the kill, everything Grettir did "went towards increasing his honor and fortune,"⁶⁴ but only until he turns 20. During this period, Grettir must travel abroad after having axed a farmhand to death. Unruly bachelors, like Grettir, could be sentenced to outlawry to spend three years away from Iceland. This was a temporary solution to bachelor dysfunctionality, intended to motivate men to better themselves and accept responsibility upon return. The sagas give the impression that not only outlaws but every ambitious man embarks on a journey to amass status and wealth. *Njal's Saga* (*Njáls saga*) describes an exodus of such proportions that there was much talk "about how the district was being drained of its best men."⁶⁵

Grettir follows in the footsteps of his great-grandfather, who earlier in the saga raided with a friend for three years, during both men's engagements. The protagonist's eventual demise is motivated in a character flaw. His exaggerated love for the bachelor lifestyle is attached to an inglorious trait which he inherited from his father, who "did not like work much." Grettir "wouldn't do the same share of the work he was supposed to do on the ship as the other men, nor would he pay to make up for it." When receiving room and board on a Norwegian farm, he refuses to reciprocate with labor. Instead, "Grettir was always going visiting and used to go to other farms there on the island." We get an impression of easy living, Grettir strolling through town and "sitting in a certain shop drinking." Such

behavior appears to be acceptable for a period, but his saga foreshadows what awaits if he does not stop in time.⁶⁶

Historical berserks were likely elite warriors and bodyguards.⁶⁷ In the sagas, they often embody the most socially disruptive aspects of bachelor warriors in times of peace. *Grettir's Saga* tells us that “berserks were in the habit of challenging noblemen to duels for the sake of money or women.”⁶⁸ A dozen of these hyperproblematic bachelors attack a farm where Grettir happens to be alone with a group of women. His ability to defeat these berserks, thus saving the women, is a turning point that earns him great renown. If only Grettir had been willing to settle down, his bachelorhood could have been an exemplary one.

Gisli's Saga (*Gísla saga*) also accounts for bachelors who roam the countryside to rape and plunder.⁶⁹ In *Egil's Saga* (*Egils saga*), a berserk grows wealthy by challenging men for their farms.⁷⁰ Authors dramatize olden-days kinship societies as a veritable nightmare for regular people who have no authorities to call on when bachelor behemoths “carried off men’s wives [and daughters] and kept them with them for a week or a fortnight and then took them back home.”⁷¹ *The Saga of the People of Eyri* (*Eyrbyggja saga*)⁷² plays out how gruesome life can get when a community suffers a surplus of men. Thirty bachelors fortify a farm and terrorize their surroundings. These sagas portray how intricately tied mating practices are to social orders. An authorial intent seems to be to convince readers and listeners of the idea that kinship societies suffer a lawlessness that lets powerful men rape the women of regular men. The sagas do not spell out that the bachelor surplus results in part from polygynous woman-hoarding but convey that the more men we civilize through pair-bonds, the more peaceful our communities will become. I interpret the underlying message to be that, while feuding and raiding may appeal to aspects of male psychology, feudalism and lifelong monogamy lead to better societies.

No saga makes this a more central theme than *Grettir's Saga*. Bjørn Bandlien writes that “here the berserk has become a parody of the old-fashioned way to win a woman.” Showing off their martial superiority only inspires women’s contempt, as heroic love has lost its hegemony. Bandlien concludes, “From the mid-thirteenth century, it is clear that men who rely on the old warrior ideals are on the losing side.”⁷³ When plundering opportunities had been plenty, bachelors—even if they were violent and anti-social—could be valuable raiding partners. Among farmers struggling to get by, such men mostly impose costs. Through connecting monstrous berserks to prolonged bachelorhood—and bachelors to laziness—the sagas encourage men to marry early and work hard rather than take big risks to seek fortune, fame, and an abundance of women, in spite of this being what their most admired ancestors had done.

The ethos that emerges from this discourse—one of pragmatism, low emotional arousal, and hard work—is that of companionate love, which I explore in Chapter 3. *Grettir's Saga* dwells not on companionate pair-bonding but plays out the transition away from heroic love. An earl decides to outlaw bachelor berserks who breach the peace. He bans duels altogether. As the Saga Age progresses—which functions as a parallel to thirteenth-century Iceland—even berserks understand that bachelorhood cannot be forever. By then, it could be too late, as “no respectable woman [wants] to be landed with a berserk for the rest of her life.” Like Grettir, berserks are blemished with not being “used to hard work.” They are said to be wasteful with money, while the new era’s ideal is to be “a good and thrifty farmer.”⁷⁴ The message is clear: men who want mating opportunities—that is, one long-term pair-bond—must put down their sword and pick up the plow.

The above episodes exemplify the exceptional level of bachelor derision that the sagas embody. Likely, the skewed Norse sex ratio that had resulted from selective female infanticide—and made much worse by settler societies attracting a majority of men⁷⁵—drove Icelandic culture to develop strongly negative stereotypes to discourage the type of behavior that Grettir displays toward the end of his saga. He returns to Iceland having “become such a renowned person for his strength and bravery that none other of the young people seemed comparable.” Instead of stopping while he is ahead, Grettir’s self-conceit has grown “so great that he thought nothing was beyond him.”⁷⁶ This attitude dooms him. Grettir had been a valuable retinue warrior, but now the king refuses to accept his service. No one challenges the giant man’s “strength and valor,” but a severe case of *ógæfu* attaches itself to him. This originally pre-Christian concept describes a form of bad luck that is unrelated to religion or sinfulness. No matter how well-meant Grettir’s actions are, his *ógæfuleysi* sends him toward death.⁷⁷

Grettir’s misfortune comes from a supernatural curse, but he invites *ógæfu* upon himself by remaining a bachelor. The cursing spirit tells him: “You have become renowned up to now for your deeds, but from now on you will become guilty of crimes and deeds of violence, and nearly everything you do will lead to your misfortune and failure . . . You will find it hard to be alone and this will bring you to your death.”⁷⁸ The formerly respected warrior ends his life with 19 years of miserable outlawry on the margins of Iceland’s inhospitable geography. With this tragic ending, the author warns against extending one’s bachelorhood once a man has proven his worth.

Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained

With all this in mind, we return to *The Saga of Björn*. The superior young male gets “ample funds for the trip” from his father and foster-father so

that he can embark on foreign adventures. He agrees to return in three years to pay back his foster-father, who “put forward on Björn’s behalf money equal to all that [his future father-in-law] possessed, besides the bride-price for his daughter Oddny.”⁷⁹ Björn makes the most of his era’s plentiful raiding opportunities. He proves himself more than worthy of being Oddny’s husband. As his allotted period comes to an end, he convinces himself that his bachelor days should continue. Like many of the actual Norse of the Viking Age, the fictional Björn is strongly driven to continue risk-seeking behaviors that can further elevate his status. His less capable companion, Thord, finds Björn’s choice unwise: “With so much honor and glory gained already, to take such risks now!” Björn replies, “Nothing ventured, nothing gained, and I will go raiding.”

Men like Björn might not experience their desire for additional success to be related to gaining access to more and higher-value women, but status is a proxy for mating opportunity. Evolution instilled in men a variety of desires to motivate behaviors likely to increase their genetic legacy. Even if men do not feel that their efforts are directed at getting more women, this is what their nature drives them toward. Björn tells Thord his justification: “I think I have not tested myself in enough enterprises, or explored widely enough the customs of good men, and if I go to Iceland at once, I will not be inclined to travel again so soon after my marriage.” Only much later, when the king encourages retirement, is Björn willing to call quits. The saga uses the king as a mouthpiece for First Sexual Revolution morality: “I would wish that you give up raiding. Though you feel it suits you well, God’s law is often violated.”⁸⁰

Björn’s extended bachelorhood had let him win “great fame and honor from the king” for defeating a champion warrior whom no one else dared meet in single combat.⁸¹ Such exceptional glory is of limited utility in the moral universe in which the saga author has placed his protagonist. Björn chose not to prioritize his one allotted woman, and for this the narrative punishes him. By not returning in time, Björn allows Thord to scheme his way into marrying Oddny, who is described as the best match in Iceland. The protagonist spends the rest of his life in a somewhat sad and bitter existence without the woman he desires, eventually being murdered by an inferior man, Thord. I read Björn’s death to be an inevitable consequence of him having refused to settle down in time. Like Grettir, he ends his life as an outcast, without love or the support of his community. Their capabilities allowed these men to earn more status than their peers, but when this is not enough, their communities reject them.

Egil’s Saga offers another example of how death is the decisive criterion of evaluative judgment. This story, too, makes a case for it being “better to ride a whole wagon home,” which is what Skallagrim advises his son, Thorolf. Skallagrim quotes: “The more journeys you make, the

more directions they take.” As a high-status male, Skallagrim knows how crucial it is for men to stand out in their kinship society’s fierce male-male competition. He offers Thorolf “as much wealth from here as you think you need to show your stature.” Alas, his son appears to be as attracted as Björn was to prolonged glory amassment. Thorolf declines the money but promises: “When I come to Iceland for a second time, I will settle down.” His father replies, “I have an intuition that if we part now we will never meet again.”⁸² Such foreshadowing tells us that Thorolf will never return. Shortly thereafter, he is killed in battle. The grim destinies of these superior males imparted to young Icelandic men of the thirteenth century that they should strive to accumulate as much status as they could to ensure a good marriage, but then direct their efforts at productive labor and monogamous reproduction. The era of heroic woman-hoarding was over.

Fiction as a Cultural Tool

A belief in heroic love was integral to the master-narratives of polygynous kinship societies. Men were encouraged to acquire multiple mates, and when the women in their in-group were spoken for, men were incentivized to capture women from neighboring peoples. For tribes locked in conflict over contested resources, such an ideology was adaptive—and, in many environments, inevitable. A tribe could choose more peaceful beliefs and not increase their power through the annihilation of competitors, but such a strategy would only benefit them until they were attacked by a group that had mastered raiding. With no higher-level organization to impose cooperation on underlying social units, the contest over what David Buss terms “the most important resource”—women—runs a high risk of turning murderous.

A belief in heroic love could not have undergirded a feudal Europe united by a Christian master-narrative. After the Church dissolved the continent’s tribes, all men were meant to submit to a feudal lord. The era’s universal justice entailed that right should not be on the side of the powerful. If men still had felt justified in forcibly taking each other’s women, the feudal lord’s power would have been illusory. A skewed sex ratio would have undermined social stability. Saga authors seem to have understood this, how paramount it was to restrain elite woman-hoarding if Iceland was to join European normalcy. To facilitate peace and productivity, men had to be convinced to direct their efforts toward incremental improvement, that is, to invest in their wife and children and the farm they ran as a nuclear family. Risking your life to capture slaves for labor and additional reproduction ceased to be an alternative—at least within the borders of Christian Europe.

This unique moral transformation—from heroic to companionate love—provided the West with a competitive advantage. Warring over women can benefit the winners, but the larger community loses. Sexual conflicts, in general, are so costly that they tend to be maladaptive from a higher-level perspective.⁸³ Through humanity’s agricultural phase, one tribe’s gain was mostly another’s loss; productivity per capita was stagnant.⁸⁴ Underpinned by a new mating morality, which drove a line of new practices, European productivity slowly began to improve. Without the First Sexual Revolution, the later industrial revolutions—in all likelihood—would not have come to be.⁸⁵

For men—and women—to successfully submit to the companionate mating regime, they had to resist feelings of lust and love that could undermine their ability to make one pair-bond last a lifetime. They were told that giving in to temptation would condemn them to an eternity in hell. Before the afterlife, too, sanctions were severe for infidelity and breakups. In the impoverished medieval environment, couples should have as their main concern to keep as many children as possible alive through the winter. The core tenet of companionate love was to uphold “the mutual responsibility of husbands and wives for running the household or farm.”⁸⁶

The paramount social unit no longer being the kin group, but the nuclear family, changed leadership requirements. Kin groups had typically been led by one patriarch. Under feudalism, patriarchal ideals persisted, but sometimes as a façade. The man was expected to be the head of his family, but for the lower classes, some marriages were better understood as partnerships. This transition, from living in kin groups to nuclear families, was in many regards the most impactful change since the Neolithic Revolution had tied our ancestors to fields. Monogamy and small-family living set Western relationships on a course toward romantic love and gender equality.⁸⁷ Submitting to a violently capable—and perhaps abusive and emotionally unstable—warrior no longer had the same upside as in lawless kinship societies, in which families more often had to protect themselves. In the feudal era, women were incentivized to partner with a man who worked hard and lived frugally. Men’s incentives were also affected. When acquiring his one woman, a man should prioritize her physical strength, productivity, and fertility.⁸⁸

In terms of mating ideals, this was a radical break, especially for elites. The saga authors not only chronicled this transition but also sought to influence the communities for which they were written, as these still straddled the conflicting moralities of heroic and companionate love. For such a context, Bandlien believes that writing captivating fiction was a smart strategy: “Saga literature must have been an effective tool in changing Icelanders’ attitudes to marriage and far more successful as a didactic measure than the twelfth century’s saint-versus-demon portrayals of sexual and matrimonial morals.”⁸⁹

The sagas were written for thirteenth-century Iceland, which still suffered a skewed sex ratio due to continued immigration and lingering pagan practices, but a less acute one than during the Viking Age.⁹⁰ To what extent these stories had a direct influence on the nation's cultural and political evolution, we cannot know, but we know that Church MFPs became hegemonic also in Iceland, although this took time. The last documented cases of Icelandic polygyny were among the clergy. The Church required that they be celibate, but Icelandic "priests were buried with multiple wives and children as late as the 1400s."⁹¹ As monogamy became universal, women went from being hoarded by powerful men to being pawns in power games between families, especially among the higher classes.⁹² In Iceland, monogamous marriage became "big business and a bargaining chip in the game for aristocratic control."⁹³

Meanwhile, on the Norse mainland, King Hákon—to whom Icelanders would later submit—struggled with the same transition. His pious grandfather had scolded and pleaded with his aristocratic warriors to make them quit raping women in times of peace. His speeches had had little effect. King Hákon—like the Icelanders—decided to employ literature. To spread the transitional ideology of courtly love, he commissioned a Norse version of the defining love story of the Middle Ages, the romance of Tristan and Iseult.

Notes

- 1 *The Saga of Bjorn, Champion of the Hitardal People* (Bjarnar saga Hít-dœlakappa), trans. Alison Finlay, in Viðar Hreinsson, ed., *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders* (Reykjavik: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997), 255–304.
- 2 Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love*.
- 3 Buss, *When Men Behave Badly*.
- 4 For an explanation of *psychological-institutional coevolution*, see Note 17 in the Introduction chapter.
- 5 The Icelandic settler society did not consist of parcels of territory inhabited by different kin groups and tribes. Farms could comprise dozens of individuals with diverse origins, but kin bonds remained an important social and political factor. Instead of being born subordinate to the patriarch of one's kin group, Icelanders submitted voluntarily to one of the commonwealth's few dozen chieftains.
- 6 Creating written fiction was costly. In addition to the creative labor, preprinting-press saga production required wholesale animal slaughter. A modern editor of *Flateyjarbók*, the largest extant manuscript, notes that 113 calfskins were needed to produce the work's 225 vellum leaves; *Viking Voyages to North America*, Birthe L. Clausen, ed. (Roskilde: Viking Ship Museum, 1993), 26.
- 7 I investigated the sagas from a perspective of cultural transition in Larsen, *Master-Narrative Transitions from the Vikings to A.I.*; Mads Larsen, "Evolutionary Insights into a Maladapted Viking in *Gísla saga*," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 120.3 (2021): 302–25.

- 8 For gender aspects of the Viking Age, two relevant works are Jenny Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Carol J. Clover, “The Politics of Scarcity: Notes on the Sex Ratio in Early Scandinavia,” *Scandinavian Studies* 60.2 (1988): 147–88. Two seminal non-evolutionary works on Norse mating ideology are Thomas Bredsdorff, *Chaos & Love: The Philosophy of the Icelandic Family Sagas*, John Tucker, trans. (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2001); Bandler, *Strategies of Passion*.
- 9 Bredsdorff, *Chaos & Love*.
- 10 It is unclear precisely how concubinage was conceptualized and practiced in the Viking Age. Raffield et al. use the term for “a man and woman having sexual relations and often cohabiting without being legally recognized as husband and wife”; “Male-Biased Operational Sex Ratios,” 315. Concubine pair-bonds could be motivated by sexual desire, romantic love, political concern, and more; Neil Price, *Children of Ash and Elm: A History of the Vikings* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), eBook.
- 11 A significant proportion of the Viking Age population consisted of unfree individuals. All slaves were potentially sex slaves, as owners were legally permitted to sexually exploit them. Sagas reference how hosts would grant visiting men sexual access to the household’s slaves; Price, *Children of Ash and Elm*.
- 12 Henrich et al., “The Puzzle of Monogamous Marriage.”
- 13 Raffield et al., “Male-Biased Operational Sex Ratios”; Raffield et al., “Polygyny.”
- 14 While a female shortage likely drove the Viking Age, what triggered the first raids to the west may have been a sudden influx of Abbasid coins to eastern Scandinavia. Such wealth could have led to even greater social stratification and increased rates of woman-hoarding. The region’s power balance could also have shifted, so that western elites were driven to seek comparable riches to the west; Raffield et al., “Male-Biased Operational Sex Ratios”; Raffield et al., “Polygyny”; James Barrett, “What Caused the Viking Age?” *Antiquity* 82 (2008): 671–85. A plethora of factors have been suggested as contributing to why the Vikings plundered Europe; Irene Baug et al., “The Beginning of the Viking Age in the West,” *Journal of Maritime Archaeology* 14 (2019): 43–80.
- 15 Many non-evolutionary scholars have been oddly resistant to engaging a practice that so indisputably has shaped human societies, especially since the Neolithic. Neil Price writes that the fact that the Vikings were polygynous “has proved controversial in academia, which is puzzling because the evidence is persistent”; Price, *Children of Ash and Elm*. I propose that the Church’s Gregorian Reform was so effective in condemning polygyny and cousin marriage—both common MFPs through human history and today—that modern Westerners struggle to relate to such practices.
- 16 Dudo of St. Quentin, *History of the Normans*, trans. Eric Christiansen (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1998).
- 17 William Camden, *Britannia: or, A Chorographical Description of the Flourishing Kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland, and the Islands Adjacent: From the Earliest Antiquity* (London: Impensis Georgii Bishop & Ioannis Norton, 1610); first edition published in Latin in 1586.
- 18 Clover, “The Politics of Scarcity,” 170.
- 19 Barrett, “What Caused the Viking Age?” 680–1.
- 20 Adam of Bremen, *History of the Archbishops of Hamburg-Bremen*, trans. Francis J. Tschan (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).
- 21 Tim Mackintosh-Smith and James Montgomery, eds., *Two Arabic Travel Books* (New York: NYU Press, 2014). Ibn Fadlan reported that the Vikings

- would have forcible group sex with the women they had captured while their own wives looked on, purportedly without distress.
- 22 Snorri Sturluson, *The Saga of Harald Fairhair*, in *Heimskringla: History of the Kings of Norway*, trans. Lee M. Hollander (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 59–95.
 - 23 Lee M. Hollander, ed., *The Lay of Harold*, in *Old Norse Poems* (London: Abela, 2010), 109–22.
 - 24 Raffield et al., “Polygyny,” 189.
 - 25 Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.
 - 26 Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.
 - 27 Ármann Jakobsson, “Masculinity and Politics in *Njáls saga*,” *Viator* 38 (2007): 191–215, 202.
 - 28 Tacitus, *Germania*, trans. and ed. H. W. Benario (Warminster: Aris & Philips, 1999), ch. 27.
 - 29 Bremen, *History of the Archbishops*, 191.
 - 30 Jakobsson, “Masculinity,” 191.
 - 31 Carolyne Larrington, “Awkward Adolescents: Male Maturation in Norse Literature,” in Shannon Lewis-Simpson, ed., *Youth and Age in the Medieval North* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 151–66, 153.
 - 32 *The Saga of the People of Laxardal (Laxdæla saga)*, trans. Keneva Kunz, in *The Sagas of the Icelanders* (New York: Penguin, 2000), ebook, ch. 76.
 - 33 *Kormak’s Saga*, trans. Rory McTurk, in *The Complete Sagas of Icelanders*, ed. Viðar Hreinsson (Reykjavik: Leifur Eiríksson, 1997), 179–224, 222.
 - 34 For earlier versions of these saga interpretations, see Mads Larsen, “Antipolygynous Bachelorhood in Icelandic Sagas,” *Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences* 17.4 (2023): 365–80.
 - 35 *Jómsvíkinga saga*, trans. N. F. Blake (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1962).
 - 36 *Jómsvíkinga saga*, 41, 44.
 - 37 Ingela Lundström and Gunilla Adolffsson, *Den sterke kvinne: fra volve til heks* (Stavanger: Arkeologisk museum i Stavanger, 1995).
 - 38 Helga Kress, *Máttugar meyar: Íslensk fornþókmennsasaga* (Reykjavik: Háskóli Íslands, 1993).
 - 39 Per Thomas Andersen, *Norsk litteraturhistorie* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2001), 25.
 - 40 Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.
 - 41 Raffield et al., “Male-Biased Operational Sex Ratios”; Raffield et al., “Polygyny.”
 - 42 Henrich et al., “The Puzzle of Monogamous Marriage.”
 - 43 Raffield et al., “Polygyny,” 197. In the sagas, powerful women are often past the age of reproductive value. For more on the dynamics that let Norse widows amass power, see Clover, “The Politics of Scarcity”; Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*.
 - 44 Raffield et al., “Male-Biased Operational Sex Ratios,” 322.
 - 45 *The Saga of the People of Laxardal*, ch. 12, 13.
 - 46 *The Saga of Gunnlaug Serpent-tongue*, trans. Katrina C. Attwood, in *The Sagas of the Icelanders* (New York: Penguin, 2000), eBook, ch. 3.
 - 47 Sandy Bardsley, “Missing Women: Sex Ratios in England, 1000–1500,” *Journal of British Studies* 53 (2014): 273–309; Clover, “The Politics of Scarcity”; Emily K. Coleman, “Infanticide in the Early Middle Ages,” in Susan Mosher Stuard, ed., *Women in Medieval Society* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1976), 47–70; Michael Siegfried, “The Skewed Sex Ratio in a Medieval Population: A Reinterpretation,” *Social Science History* 10.2 (1986): 195–204; Nancy

- L. Wicker, "Christianization, Female Infanticide, and the Abundance of Female Burials at Viking Age Birka in Sweden," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 21.2 (2012): 245–62. Not only did the polygynous Vikings likely murder more female infants, but girls were discriminated against with regard to calories. A skeletal study from Sweden found that 7% of men had been malnourished as children compared to 37% of women; Price, *Children of Ash and Elm*. For an evolutionary account of how female shortage drove war in antiquity, see Jonathan Gottschall, *The Rape of Troy: Evolution, Violence, and the World of Homer* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).
- 48 The high frequency of gay-related insults in the sagas could partly be informed by the female shortage. There tends to be a significantly higher prevalence of same-sex sexual behaviors—so-called *opportunistic homosexuality*—in environments where widespread bachelorhood is the result of "missing women."; Xueyan Yang et al., "On Same-Sex Sexual Behaviors Among Male Bachelors in Rural China: Evidence from a Female Shortage Context," *American Journal of Men's Health* 6 (2012): 108–19.
- 49 Male labor could also be more profitable. Excess female mortality may have been another factor; Peter Astbury Brunt, *Italian Manpower, 225 B.C.-A.D. 14* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971); Donald Engels, "The Problem of Female Infanticide in the Greco-Roman World," *Classical Philology* 75 (1980): 112–20; Marcia Guttentag and Paul F. Secord, *Too Many Women? The Sex Ratio Question* (Beverly Hills: SAGE Publications, 1983); Michael Obladen, "From Right to Sin: Laws on Infanticide in Antiquity," *Neonatology* 109.1 (2016): 56–61; Walter Scheidel, "Greco-Roman Sex Ratios and Femicide in Comparative Perspective," working paper, 2010.
- 50 Although we know that the Norse practiced infanticide, we do not know precisely to what extent this skewed the sex ratio. Likely, polygyny had a much stronger effect.
- 51 Roy F. Baumeister, *Is There Anything Good About Men? How Cultures Flourish by Exploiting Men* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).
- 52 Roberta Frank, "Marriage in Twelfth- and Thirteenth-Century Iceland," *Viator: Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 4 (1973): 473–84, 483.
- 53 Mildred Dickemann, "The Ecology of Mating Systems in Hypergynous Dowry Societies," *Social Science Information* 18 (1979): 163–95; Mildred Dickemann, "Female Infanticide, Reproductive Strategies, and Social Stratification: A Preliminary Model," in Napoleon A. Chagnon and William Irons, eds., *Evolutionary Biology and Human Social Behavior: An Anthropological Perspective* (North Scituate: Duxbury Press, 1979), 321–67.
- 54 Raffield et al., "Polygyny," 197, 199.
- 55 Apostolou, *Sexual Selection in Homo Sapiens*.
- 56 Frank, "Marriage," 482.
- 57 Frank, "Marriage," 481.
- 58 Frank, "Marriage," 476–7.
- 59 Polygynous mating can be understood as all sexual activity which involves a man having more than one lifelong female partner. Serial monogamy interspersed with uncommitted copulation can be considered a *de facto* polygynous regime; Khandis R. Blake and Robert C. Brooks, "Societies Should not Ignore Their Incel Problem," *Science & Society* 27.2 (2023): 111–3.
- 60 Peter Turchin, *Ultrasociety: How 10,000 Years of War Made Humans the Greatest Cooperators on Earth* (Chaplin: Beresta Books, 2015), eBook.
- 61 Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.

- 62 In this context, the term “choice” does not necessarily entail agency. An alternative would be to say that women had more “options” under a polygynous regime. In the Viking Age, marriage was primarily a contract between families. Girls could be betrothed as young as 13, although marriage was often delayed until she turned 16. The desires of individuals were subordinate to the needs of the kin group; Price, *Children of Ash and Elm*.
- 63 *The Saga of Grettir* (Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar), trans. Anthony Faulkes, in *Three Icelandic Outlaw Sagas* (London: J. M. Dent, 2001), 69–272.
- 64 *The Saga of Grettir*, 251.
- 65 *Njal’s Saga*, trans. Robert Cook (London: Penguin, 2001), ch. 75.
- 66 *The Saga of Grettir*, 101, 105, 125.
- 67 Roderick Thomas Duncan Dale, “*Berserker*: A Re-Examination of the Phenomenon in Literature and Life,” dissertation, University of Nottingham, 2014.
- 68 *The Saga of Grettir*, 109.
- 69 *Gisli Sursson’s Saga* (*Gísla saga Súrssonar*), trans. Martin S. Regal, in *The Sagas of the Icelanders* (New York: Penguin, 2000), eBook.
- 70 *Egil’s Saga*, trans. Bernard Scudder, in *The Sagas of the Icelanders* (New York: Penguin, 2000), eBook.
- 71 *The Saga of Grettir*, 109.
- 72 *Eyrbyggja saga*, trans. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (London: Penguin, 1989).
- 73 Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, 264–5.
- 74 *Eyrbyggja saga*, 70, 78, 81.
- 75 The thirteenth-century *Landnámabók* reports that nearly six times as many men as women were among Iceland’s first settlers and that settlers had four times as many sons as daughters; *The Book of Settlements: Landnámabók*, trans. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2006). We do not know how historically accurate these numbers are, but the American frontier experienced similar sex ratios, with up to “seven males over 20 years of age for each woman”; Guttentag and Secord, *Too Many Women?*, 115. In spite of the female shortage, around three-quarters of the Norse settlers were able to establish families, likely by buying or capturing Celtic women, a hypothesis strengthened by DNA tests; Agnar Helgason et al., “mtDNA and the Origin of the Icelanders: Deciphering Signals of Recent Population History,” *American Journal of Human Genetics* 66.3 (2000): 999–1016; Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*. These highly skewed ratios may partly be informed by *Landnámabók* being a genealogical account, for which contemporary Icelanders had a preference for the male line; Clover, “The Politics of Scarcity”; Wicker, “Christianization.”
- 76 *The Saga of Grettir*, 133.
- 77 Anthony Faulkes, “Introduction,” in *Three Icelandic Outlaw Sagas* (London: J. M. Dent, 2001), xv–xxviii.
- 78 *The Saga of Grettir*, 153.
- 79 *The Saga of Bjorn*, 256–7.
- 80 *The Saga of Bjorn*, 258–9, 266.
- 81 *The Saga of Bjorn*, 260.
- 82 *Egil’s Saga*, ch. 38.
- 83 Buss, *When Men Behave Badly*.
- 84 J. Bradford De Long, “Estimates of World GDP, One Million B.C.-Present,” <https://policycommons.net/artifacts/4587757/estimates-of-world-gdp-one-million-bc-present-1998/5411297/>.

- 85 Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.
- 86 Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, 43.
- 87 Baumard et al. argue convincingly that the emergence of romantic love is causally connected to economic growth—across cultures and time. Less convincingly, they reject the importance that Henrich places on the Church’s dissolution of Europe’s kinship societies. Especially with regard to gender equality, the prohibition of polygynous practices seems to have been influential; Baumard et al., “The Cultural Evolution of Love in Literary History.”
- 88 Coontz, *Marriage, a History*.
- 89 Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, 294.
- 90 Clover, “The Politics of Scarcity.”
- 91 Price, *Children of Ash and Elm*.
- 92 Frank, “Marriage.”
- 93 Tara Carter, *Iceland’s Networked Society: Revealing How the Global Affairs of the Viking Age Created New Forms of Social Complexity* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 97.

2 Promoting Courtly Love

Female Consent and Modern Morality in *Tristrams saga* (1226)

Courtly love functioned as an ideological antithesis to heroic love. Its norms and values undermined how Europe's Germanic tribes had conducted their mating. Fanciful tales of knights and maidens offered new ideals for how men of all classes should pursue sex and relationships. After the First Sexual Revolution, Tristan—the quintessential courtly knight—represents whom men should model themselves after. He is the new European *individual*.¹ In the postkinship-society era, the most impressive men need not be the patriarch of a kin group or the most capable warrior. The superior male is a multitalented individual who creates himself, adapts to novel culture, and—importantly—excels at sophisticated courtship that inspires the right emotions in his one true beloved. Tristan embodies all of the new era's ideals. He is tall, handsome, well-dressed, intelligent, educated, and trained in arts, languages, and musical instruments. His generosity is exceptional, as are his common sense and valor. He is even sexy naked. Such a flawless protagonist is perhaps a bit much for modern literary tastes, but Tristan captivated medieval Europeans in numerous adaptations of the Tristan legend.

Had Tristan been a product of the Second Sexual Revolution, the ideology of romantic love might have let him pair-bond happily forever after. A narrative imbued with courtly love had little choice but to end his life. In the Norse version, Tristan and Iseult—translated to Tristram and Ísönd—never marry. Their passionate affair ends in death. Tristram's wife ensured that he and Ísönd were

buried on separate sides of the church so that they couldn't be close to each other in the future. But it came to pass that an oak or another large tree sprouted from each of their graves and grew so tall that their limbs intertwined above the gable of the church. By this we can see how great the love between them had been. And so ends this story.²

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If you fail to connect how such an ending promotes First Sexual Revolution morality, you are in good company.³ Critics have argued over the implications of courtly love since the term was coined by Gaston Paris in 1883.⁴ Common questions have been: what kind of love and social norms are promoted by works like *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar* (1226)? If this era's ideological project was about promoting lifelong monogamy, why does true love tend to be lived out illicitly and end in death?⁵ In this chapter, I apply an evolutionary approach to courtly love that lets me suggest a few novel interpretations.

Medieval romances generally did promote monogamy, but rather than stage ideal marriages, they undermined the mating strategies of heroic love. A main concern was to convince men of the importance of female consent. Moreover, through exaggerating the power and duration of human love, courtly literature tried to persuade men to accept that having only one mate was optimal. The reward was a “special ecstasy” that would result from an exclusive “spiritual dedication” of reciprocal sexual and emotional fidelity.⁶ If a man forced himself on a woman, he would never learn if she was the right one for him. Mostly through intimate communication could a man inspire his beloved's lust and love, emotions which proved that they were meant for each other. Even the most superior of men only had the capacity for one true love, the finding of whom was paramount. Ideological specifics vary between works of courtly fiction, but a common message was that polygynous woman-hoarding is misguided.

Joseph Henrich's study of the feudal transition aids me in teasing out another function of courtly love.⁷ In kinship societies, people to a greater extent stuck to their own, were hesitant to share knowledge, and followed tradition. Submitting to the needs of one's kin group had necessitated conformity, skepticism toward nonkin, and acceptance of the role into which one was born. In feudal Europe, your in-group was meant to be all Christians, an identification that entailed an enormous leap for human psychology. After millennia of intertribal war, it was a tall ask to expect Europeans to meet strangers with openness and generosity. Yet over centuries, the transition to living in nuclear families and forging voluntary social bonds with nonkin drove a psychology of individualism, nonconformity, self-creation, knowledge sharing, and impersonal trust among strangers. Courtly love can appear to mostly be about mating, but it also promotes the social ideals inherent in the feudal transition. Romances portray knightly behavior—as embodied by Tristram—to be the best way to gain access to female sexuality and pair-bonding opportunity. Cross-culturally, heterosexual men have tended to respond eagerly to such incentives. Romances could be read as medieval pick-up guides for men, but through their courtship advice, these stories also imparted precisely the norms and values that would underpin the sociality of a modernizing Europe.

My reading of *Tristrams saga* and other Norse romances lets me investigate the coevolution of mating and modernity. Deep social transitions, whether driven by new ideology or technology, tend to require new mating practices, but people are not passive recipients of their masters' dictums. They must be convinced if they are to change such fundamental aspects of their community as how people copulate, pair-bond, and reproduce their numbers. Courtly love functioned as an ideological crowbar that undermined millennia-old beliefs while promoting Church MFPs—without the Church's blessing. Stories of illicit liaisons, full of uncontrollable lust and fiery sex, were not prescribed by the Gregorian Reform.⁸ Still, the manner in which courtly romances spread without too strong clerical protests suggests that some of those in charge understood which effect this literature could have. This certainly seems to have been the case with the Norse adaptation, which King Hákon of Norway commissioned from a "Brother Robert," presumably an Anglo-Norman friar. Over the next generations, aristocrats embraced courtly ideals; then, Norse commoners too, as similar ideals trickled down to ballads, which seem to have triggered a dance craze across the Norse world. By the mid-fourteenth century, the descendants of Vikings had internalized the righteousness of female consent and lifelong monogamy.⁹

Instilling Modern Ideals through Fiction

In the early 1200s, Norway was a European backwater. Being among the last to be Christianized had given the Norse less time to adapt to feudal demands. Civil war had raged since 1130. Primogeniture and legitimacy were not yet custom,¹⁰ so the promiscuity of kings produced troves of illegitimate children who competed for kingship. Hákon IV (1204–1263) would become the most accomplished king since Harald Fairhair, reigning for 46 years, winning domestic peace in 1240, and expanding the Norwegian Empire to include Iceland and Greenland. Hákon would create a Norwegian golden age. He grew so powerful that the Pope offered him the imperial crown, he was offered the Irish high kingship, and command of the French crusader fleet. But as a young newlywed, Hákon was a European nobody and his nation peripheral. He decided to employ fiction as one of his first steps toward modernizing Norway.¹¹

Hákon picked up where his grandfather had left off. Since a Norwegian archbishopric had been established around 1152, the Church had worked hard to "improve morals in Norway, especially the king's morals."¹² Sverre Sigurdsson won the realm in 1184 and attempted to change the mating morality of his aristocratic warriors. Taking the land and women from their enemies was still a given, but Sverre wished to avoid the conflicts that often ensued when his men raped women during peace. The Norse

elite had been exposed to courtly and other novel mating ideals from the mid-twelfth century, yet heroic love remained hegemonic. This ideology justified the sexual assaults of powerful men, so when Sverre's warriors got drunk, they often amused themselves by raping other men's women. In a speech against drunkenness, Sverre encouraged his men to no longer use their martial superiority for personal gain. They should be "ferocious as lions when there is war" but "as lambs in peacetime."¹³

In a contemporaneously written saga, Sverre's immediate predecessor is criticized for being a heavy drinker and womanizer.¹⁴ Sagas attest to how kings often had a plethora of sex partners, until Sverre, whose saga mentions no extrapair copulation. On his deathbed, the chaste king swore that he had no illegitimate sons.¹⁵ His speeches and personal example seem not to have changed "warrior morals to any great degree."¹⁶ Later sagas dramatize how powerful men continued routinely to rape women well into the thirteenth century, as heroic ideals persisted.

Sverre's grandson might have found an intellectual kin in the romance protagonist, who was spreading the courtly gospel to region after region. Hákon too had received the type of education that created the new European elite—although his foster father was not quite as progressive as Tristram's. Hákon learned to read at age seven, but when religious song was added to his education, his guardian earl protested against such overly clerical—meaning, effeminate—activities.¹⁷ A boy destined to fight civil wars should perhaps focus on developing other skills. Hákon's legacy would speak to the importance of combining military might and political astuteness with a strong cultural program. Likely, his comprehensive exposure to the arts made Hákon optimistic with regard to literature's ability to influence people's thoughts and behavior. He seems to have commissioned several Norse adaptations of popular romances, of which *Tristrams saga* was the first.

The stories of Tristan and Iseult originated from a Celtic legend that was turned into medieval entertainment. The common branch—without courtly ideology—was developed by Béroul and Eilhart, two poets of the late 1100s. In the same period, Thomas of Britain infused his Old French narrative with courtly ideals.¹⁸ Only a quarter of his work is extant. Building on Thomas, Gottfried von Strassburg wrote an early 1200s masterpiece, which he never completed. King Hákon commissioned a Norse adaptation of Thomas's version. Building on the saga tradition, Brother Robert turned French verse into Norse prose.¹⁹ He cut long philosophical and psychological passages and catered to local conditions and sensibilities, but mostly followed the original narrative.²⁰ Icelandic scribes ensured that his work survived to the modern era, making *Tristrams saga* the only extant complete version of the Tristan legend from the formative period of its courtly branch. The earliest complete manuscript is from the

seventeenth century, but older fragments and other evidence contribute to a scholarly consensus on the surviving text being “a rather conservative version” of Robert’s work.²¹

Meritocracy and Cultural Inclusivity

Tristrams saga begins by staging how the pursuit of love as well as Europe’s new impersonal prosociality are both underpinned by chivalrous ideals.²² The prelude concerns Tristram’s father, Kanelangres, who is a man of the old world but eager to learn the ways of the new. He ventures to a moral center of new Europe: the Cornish court of King Markis. In this beacon of merit and transcultural inclusivity, the importance of kin bonds is greatly reduced. Markis’s court treats “with honor and with utmost comradeship all those gallant men who come to them and who wish to be with them.” This is a Europe in which the competition for talent draws from a larger pool: the entire Christian world. The narrator conveys how counterintuitive it still must have felt for many not to grant privileged positions based on kinship or old relations. When Kanelangres joins Markis’s retinue, the king places him and his knights “in a high position over and above his own knights.” The narrator finds it necessary to encourage such meritocratic practices, emphasizing that Markis “gained by doing so a wealth of good luck and marvelously good fortune” (31).

King Markis’s court reads as a representation not only of the era’s royal administrations but also of its charter towns, guilds, and universities. Networks of knowledge transfer opened up across feudal Europe. A new mobile class emerged of warriors, monks, craftsmen, merchants, lawyers, clerics, and other educated professionals.²³ Kanelangres’s *bildungsjourney* offers an insightful portrayal of the psychological evolution necessary for individuals to succeed in this new environment. The knights who flock to Markis’s court have a status that would have lent itself to polygynous pursuits. Having them adapt to women’s courtly mate preferences is the means for their transformation. Bachelor knights must still be formidable in martial arts, but also learn how to woo women by using sophisticated social skills. Everything is staged so that females can cast verdict on male performance. When Markis throws a grand feast, he invites “all distinguished men . . . and, of course, their daughters” (33).

Kanelangres is the worthiest of men in knightly contests, which earns him the passionate attention of King Markis’s sister. His strong feelings for her motivate him to master courtly mating strategies. The romantic journey he embarks on teaches him valuable skills; it parallels the era’s political transformation, which turned “independent feudal magnates into polite courtiers at the absolutist court.”²⁴ The unity of dedication that men were meant to direct at one woman aligned with the era’s commitment to only

one God and one feudal lord. Strong feelings should motivate romantic, religious, and political fidelity. The narrator portrays true love as being so overwhelming that individuals are mostly powerless to resist its draw: Markis's sister "knew her feelings to be impetuously determined by her love for [Kanelangres]" (39). Similarly, Kanelangres's feelings make him understand that women must choose a mate based on their own emotions. Christian warriors are not conquerors of women, but their protectors—and liberators.

Romances promote viewing this new, less aggressive ideology as heroic through juxtaposing it with the earlier understanding of heroism. *Ívens saga*, another romance adaptation likely commissioned by Hákon, portrays the consequences of heroic love as female oppression. The chivalrous Sir Íven earns renown through liberating 300 maidens who are in a castle "as slaves until a knight might come along who freed us."²⁵ The knight figure thus represents the force that undoes antiquity's mating regime. In *Erex saga*, probably also adapted during Hákon's reign,²⁶ Sir Erex earns King Arthur's praise after annihilating powerful men who abduct or violently compete for women who are committed or refuse to grant consent. The fact that several villains are earls or kings is not coincidental; we get the impression that powerful men use their resources to abuse women. In *Erex saga*, these men face death unless an epiphany, that "God has shown His justice to us," makes them realize that it is unwise to "shame and disgrace" women.²⁷

After his stay with Markis, Kanelangres lives up to such ideals. When he is forced to return to his own kingdom, he declares, "Now, choose for yourself, my love, and consider what you want most." His emphasis on consent seals the deal. Kanelangres's true love "understood his good intentions and his wish to take her with him to his homeland, or, if she preferred to remain there, then he would do as she wished, then she felt him to be above reproach, since he so honorably would do as she desired" (47). Both parties have played their parts well; love, pair-bonding, and reproduction lie ahead; and, of course, death. Considering the circumstances of Kanelangres's demise, I wonder if the author uses as motivation the same condemning view on prolonged bachelorhood as that which I in the previous chapter argued that several sagas convey. Kanelangres had enjoyed Markis's bachelor games for so long that he had left his own kingdom vulnerable to attack. Arriving home too late, he dies in battle, but not before marrying his true love in a Church ceremony. The Gregorian Reform had delegitimized the private weddings that had been custom, so being a courtly romance, *Tristrams saga* must wedge in the appropriate type of wedding, even while Kanelangres's kingdom is under attack. Otherwise, Tristram would not be his legitimate heir. Giving birth in deep sorrow, Kanelangres's wife dies.

The New Norse Man

Tristram is raised by a foster father who understands what the new era requires. He ensures that the boy learns “the knowledge of books . . . the seven liberal arts and . . . a great many languages [and] seven different stringed instruments.” Tristram’s defining traits are “good nature, generosity . . . courtly conduct, intelligence, common sense, and valor.” Kinship societies had been undergirded by our predisposition for cooperating and sharing resources with relatives; behavior that aids the survival and reproduction of those with whom we share genes is favored by natural selection. To move beyond kin organization, we must develop culture that motivates a wider in-group identification. *Tristrams saga* promotes such culture through how Tristram’s foster father does not give preference to his own sons. He invests in Tristram, the obvious talent, by giving him “the most costly clothing, fine horses, and all kinds of luxury goods, giving him everything that was choice and highly prized. At this his sons became angry” (51).

Those listed skills, traits, and resources align with the era’s emerging male ideal, that is, what women generally prefer in a mate.²⁸ They also align with what would tend to promote professional success. Functional social orders exploit men’s desire for mating success by offering ideals that encourage men to strive professionally in a manner that also makes them more attractive to women. The facilitating mechanism is that women’s preference for high-status mates makes men strive harder for success, which—with functional culture—benefits the community. *Tristrams saga* tries to influence how Norse culture conceptualizes the ideal man, conveying that a man’s violent capacity is now less central for professional and romantic success. Stephen Jaeger writes that the protagonist becomes “the epitome of the courtly chivalric gentleman.”²⁹ Although Tristram has good martial skills, these are not emphasized. In general, romance heroes are a mix of the old warrior and the new clerical intellectual.³⁰ Romance authors—mostly clerics themselves, albeit more worldly ones³¹—promote their values ahead of the heroic warrior code. Across Europe, the Tristan character pushed the male ideal even further. He is infused with such boldly clerical traits that they “take command in the delineation of character.”³² Tristram uses his sword when he must, but to get ahead, his intellectual skills are often the more powerful weapons.

Even barbaric Norwegian merchants recognize the superior value of the new European man. Not speaking the local tongue, they struggle to conduct business—until Tristram saves the day with his language skills. While he sits immersed in a chess game with one of the Norwegians, they abduct him, as “they would stand to gain from his knowledge and learning, and furthermore, if they wanted to sell him, then they would get a lot of money” (53).

God is on the side of Tristram, as a storm sends the merchants' ship to where Markis still reigns. The first people whom Tristram meets belong, like him, to Europe's new mobile class. Two pilgrims greet him courteously; everyone's opening word is "friend." Tristram's words, actions, and "splendid clothing" signal that he should be viewed as an in-group individual, in spite of the pilgrims being from Venice. The author gives the impression that when the new European unmoors from his native shores, he can place his trust in God and fellow Christians. North Europeans may have been brought up in a less civilized milieu, yet they need not harbor fears of cultural inferiority—not even when meeting Venetians. Diversity is a boon for everyone; when Tristram encounters royal hunters, they show remarkable appreciation for his bushcraft. He first learns their way of cutting up game, but when they see his "excellent and courtly craft," they immediately adopt his method, as "we prefer your custom to ours" (57–61).

The knowledge-sharing continues. At Markis's court, people uphold that "no custom was more beautiful or more glorious than the one Tristram had learned in his country" (61). After he has demonstrated his harp skills, the king trusts him so intimately that Tristram is invited to play in his quarters until the king falls asleep. Importantly, Tristram is "accepted as one of the court due to his skills"³³; that he is Markis's nephew is only discovered later. The story continues to play out the reduced importance of kin bonds when Tristram's foster father shows up "clothed in rags." Your pedigree matters less than your resources, as "one might be from a good family and possess good manners, but if one was nevertheless poor, one would find few at court willing to help him" (65).

After Tristram has won back from their enemies the kingdom his father lost, he takes it upon himself to free Markis's realm from paying tribute to the Irish. He succeeds but incurs an injury through poison that only the Irish queen would know how to heal. Tristram places his faith in God, whose storm sends him to her. While hiding his identity as their enemy, Tristram's harp skills and courtly behavior let him climb the social hierarchy, so much so that "the beautiful and graceful Princess Ísönd . . . was very eager to see him and something of his varied talents." The queen agrees to cure Tristram. Ísönd is put under his tutelage "to learn to play the harp first and then to write letters and compose poetry." He teaches her so effectively that "throughout the kingdom her fame and renown grew because of the wide ranging knowledge that she had learned by paying attention to him" (87).

The clerical skills and values, which are central to the feudal ideal, are thus made independent of gender. Romances promote the idea that European culture should be further civilized through education, starting with royal and aristocratic elites, but made possible by those who disseminate the era's knowledge and mores through courts, universities,

monasteries, and other pan-European networks. This cross-cultural coming together required a new sociality.³⁴ Irving Singer places courtly love in this context, viewing “courtliness as the acquisition of those polite and equilibrating gestures which enable human beings to communicate without intruding upon each other’s privacy.”³⁵ Hákon later had *King’s Mirror* (*Konungs skuggsjá*, c. 1250) written to disseminate similar insights into how royalty, merchants, warriors, and other classes should think and act in order to get along and ahead in the new world. After a line of romance adaptations, Hákon’s courtly manual spelled out his ambitions for medieval Norsemen. Jonna Kjær regards *Konungs skuggsjá* as the culmination of Hákon’s modernizing efforts.³⁶

Tristrams saga aligns itself with the mobile classes. It portrays how good feudal rulers know that they have to accommodate such people for their realm to prosper. The Irish queen is upset when Tristram decides to return home. She complains that “this is what comes of aiding a foreigner; now you will leave us for the sake of your friends just when we wish to have you most.” Still, “we will not keep you here against your will” (89). She is not the only royal who has to adapt, as even King Arthur is powerless to resist the open markets of a feudal Europe.³⁷ In *Parcevals saga*, another romance likely adapted during Hákon’s reign, Arthur “is sad because a great many of his knights have gone away to various other strongholds where they feel it is more comfortable to be.”³⁸

To contrast with this new era, Markis’s nobles represent the previous era’s parochialism and zero-sum thinking. Instead of realizing how fortunate they are to have on their side someone as superior as Tristram, they view him as a threat, “for they feared and resented his goodness, intelligence, and good fortune” (91). They arrange for him to secure Princess Ísönd as Markis’s wife, to ensure an heir, so that Tristram never becomes their sovereign. With 20 of Markis’s best guardsmen, Tristram sets sail. In the Irish harbor, the narrator engages one of Hákon’s more immediate ambitions with the romance: “to change the behavior of his *hirð*.”³⁹ Markis’s guardsmen—unlike Norse aristocrats—do not amuse themselves with violence and rape. While waiting, they “ate and drank and played various games, but they transacted no business, rather amusing themselves most cheerfully with courtly conversation among well-mannered knights” (97).

Tristram must find a way to make Ísönd marry Markis. He uses himself as bait. Under a mating regime of individual choice, it is imperative that the woman assesses not only her courtiers’ qualities but also their intensions. Through humanity’s forager and agricultural phases, parents wielded considerable influence on their offspring’s mate choice. *Homo sapiens* was “the only species on the planet where males are selected by other males for reproductive purposes.”⁴⁰ Only after the Second Sexual Revolution of the eighteenth century, would Westerners move toward a regime of individual

choice. The First Sexual Revolution brought a doctrine of double consent, meaning that offspring and parents should agree. In reality, parental choice remained dominant, but especially daughters earned a right to refuse that provided valuable leverage.⁴¹

Courty love promoted the practice that a suitor should first earn the woman's consent, then seek parental acceptance. Under such a regime, when the woman takes greater charge of her own mate selection process, she can rely less on her family and community to screen men; she must do more of the screening herself. Since male lovers can run off, leaving for the female to bear the burden of childrearing, women are driven to elicit a credible commitment to their pair-bond.⁴² In romances, the literary device for doing so is to have the bachelor knight put his life in danger in contests against other knights or in battle against enemies, giants, dragons, and a variety of other monsters. Ísönd criticizes a suitor, her father's steward, for not incurring a large enough risk. He tries to take credit for a dragon that Tristram had slain but fails at deceiving Ísönd. She interprets the steward's lack of courage to mean that he only "pretended to love her" (101). The fact that Tristram becomes deadly sick from dragon poison is the type of costly commitment that romances reward.

Such dynamics of self-sacrifice and chivalry prompted Talbot Donaldson, a scholar of medieval literature, to compare courtliness to the behavior he observed among cardinals on his bird feeder.⁴³ Peter Dronke went further, proposing that courtly love was universal, as its characteristic behaviors "might occur at any time or place."⁴⁴ Such a claim is too broad. An evolutionary perspective illuminates why the males of a bird species that mates monogamously for life would act similarly to fictional knights meant to pursue the same pair-bond. If a species mates promiscuously, females are incentivized to accept sperm from the male who has proved himself superior in contests against other males. Such "heroic love" is found among more than 90% of mammalian species.⁴⁵ For the few pair-bonding mammals, females seek to elicit a credible commitment and proof of social compatibility. The ideology of courtly love was a means for accentuating those two elements in Western mating after patriarchal kin structures for millennia had greatly reduced women's power over mate selection. Heroic love had underpinned mating strategies common in promiscuous and polygynous regimes—that is, intense male–male competition followed by a distribution of females among the winners. Courtly love was cultural programming for a monogamous regime of increasingly individualized choice.⁴⁶

There is also an element of mate ranking in female commitment demands. Ísönd scolds the steward for not understanding that "if I loved all of those who would declare their love for me . . . I would be a sorry soul indeed." Tristram tops her ranking after slaying the dragon. He also

earns Ísönd's more carnal admiration, as when he bathed, "she gazed upon his handsome countenance with loving eyes" (111–3). Having won over Ísönd's emotions, Tristram falls by the king's feet in submission and lets the royal family know his true motivation: to have Ísönd marry King Markis. Because such a marriage would be politically beneficial, the Irish king consents—without consulting his daughter.

A Gold Ring of Fidelity

The medieval reader, or listener, should now think that Tristram and Ísönd are meant for each other. The fact that her father uses her marriage for political means should doom the royal union. The Irish queen fashioned a potion that would ensure lifelong love between Ísönd and Markis, but this is accidentally drunk by Ísönd and Tristram. Their love condemns "them both to a life of sorrow and trouble and anxiety caused by carnal desire and constant longing" (121). The ensuing years provide abundant drama with the young lovers' sneaking around behind Markis's back. In the common branch of the Tristan legend, the potion's effect usually wanes after three years. Folk psychology likely informed this duration. Love seems to have evolved to match the forager mating cycle of 3–4 years,⁴⁷ a hypothesis supported by modern divorce statistics which show a cross-cultural peak after such a period.⁴⁸ With Tristan's courtly branch being put in service of Church MFPs, the beloveds find no respite after three years. No solution exists for their predicament.

Critics have struggled to explain why love cannot lead to functional relationships in courtly fiction. Tragic endings have been interpreted to reflect a "disdain for the physicality of love-making,"⁴⁹ "the destructive power of sexual craving,"⁵⁰ Western man's quest for passion as a search for death,⁵¹ the couple's subversion of "feudal loyalties, kinship relations, and the marital bond,"⁵² or to promote a "compensatory ideal," one unattainable in the narrative but desirable for the culture from which the story arose.⁵³ Singer argues that the previous centuries' "ignorance and poverty" prevented Europeans from embracing polite courtship. He writes that economic growth brought philosophical progress which made "man able to begin thinking consecutively about ways of harmonizing sexual impulses with idealistic motives." Singer reads the lovers' demise to exemplify "medieval humanism's failure to achieve an adequate synthesis between naturalistic and religious love [which] was followed by relatively more successful attempts in later centuries."⁵⁴

I do not find *Tristrams saga* to discourage sex. Lovemaking is portrayed positively, but it must be cultivated within a relationship of deep love. The couple's demise, I argue, is primarily motivated by a particular subversion: sinning against the imperative of having only one mate. Singer's focus on

economics and philosophy occludes. Europeans conceived of courtly love as a response to the feudal transition, not because they stopped being ignorant.⁵⁵ Courtly ideology offered no philosophical foundation from which societies could deduce detailed recipes for mating. The main functions of courtly love were to (1) convince high-status men to accept lifelong monogamy; (2) spread the practice of female consent; (3) alter the male ideal; and (4) promote the social practices and attitudes that would come to define WEIRD cultures.⁵⁶ A more realistic, coherent ideology might have been more philosophically satisfying, but cultural success is about effect, not verisimilitude or logical coherence. Courtly fiction imparted on Europeans new ways to think around love, courtship, and pair-bonds. New thinking motivated different emotions, which reprogrammed people's moral algorithm, so that it felt more natural to submit to the demands of the Gregorian Reform. Exaggerating the power of love is not best understood as a "compensatory ideal," but as a means for promoting lifelong monogamy.

My interpretation is supported by how Tristram seals his fate when he abandons his truelove after years of clandestine copulation. In a faraway land, he marries a similarly named princess, Ísodd, "for fun and pleasure [and to] forget Ísönd" (169). The formulation seems informed by the author's plan to cast clear judgment on pair-bonding for "rebound" purposes. Tristram's gold ring reminds him of what the new era requires. It symbolizes how Ísönd had forbidden him to have sex with others. Tristram has acquired a wife but concludes that "I cannot live with her carnally without breaking my word and putting my humanity to shame." The very essence of being human is thus connected to fidelity. When Ísodd makes advances in bed, "his reason restrained his desire" (171). Tristram explains to Ísodd's furious brother that to Ísönd "I have surrendered my desire so completely that I am unable to love Ísodd" (193).

Again, Tristram is wounded by poison. This time, only Ísönd's herbal knowledge can save him. When she learns that her truelove has not cheated on her with his wife, that "he is in every respect your faithful beloved" (217), Ísönd sets sail. An eavesdropping Ísodd learns that Tristram "loved another more than her" (215). By lying to Tristram that Ísönd is not coming, Ísodd makes it so that "he surrendered his spirit and died" (221). Ísönd arrives to find Tristram dead. She begs for God's mercy, "then she lay down on the floor and kissed him and placed her hands about his neck. And there she died" (223).

These circumstances make me interpret Tristram's death as primarily being a moral consequence of him having had multiple mates. When this superior young male chooses to marry "for fun and pleasure," the narrative must punish him. Fittingly, his scorned spouse effectuates his demise. Additional instances of copulation for fun, pleasure, or strategy likely also inform the sins for which Ísönd begs God's mercy, such as when she coerced

her female attendant into having sex with men for worldly reasons (121, 201). *Tristrams saga* may not have offered thirteenth-century Norsemen a coherent model for making love last a lifetime. But the romance strongly warns against entering into holy matrimony without the appropriate motivation.

Romances for the Rich, Ballads for the Poor

The scholarly consensus is that King Hákon's commissioning of romances affected Norse culture.⁵⁷ Such literature, in combination with other influences, drove an ideological change that made it no longer heroic to rape women as a means for dominating one's enemies. Sexual assaults continued, but deprived of this cultural justification.⁵⁸ Contrary to what much scholarship has claimed, the Christian, monogamous environment empowered women. Roger Boase asserted that when courtly love put a woman on a pedestal, she "was scarcely more emancipated than the wife who was her husband's chattel."⁵⁹ Courtly manners may not seem sufficiently gender-equal from a modern perspective. But considering how women often had been treated under the previous polygynous social orders, the First Sexual Revolution entailed a long step in an emancipatory direction.⁶⁰

After courtly ideals had taken hold, Norse women became viewed less like commodities and more like individuals. Wives who engaged in extra-pair copulation could see their own honor reduced, but less so that of their husband or father. As long as one was sufficiently clandestine, short-term mating needed not reduce a woman's mate value to a significant extent.⁶¹ *Möttuls saga*, an adaptation likely commissioned by Hákon, proposes that since nearly everyone cheats, it is better not to know. The narrator encourages that "no one say anything but good about women, because it is more fitting to conceal than to reveal something, even though one may know the true state of affairs."⁶²

Courtly love was not invented by someone intending to empower women and motivate compliance with the Gregorian Reform. Large cultural changes are far too complex for anyone to understand what is going on, let alone create a new morality likely to achieve a desired outcome. Courtly love arose as an ad hoc ideology infused into a conveniently available genre, which let Europeans discuss how to pair-bond in a radically different environment. Romances with love and chivalric combat had been around since antiquity. The new ideological elements were imported from Arabic poetry and philosophy that in the twelfth century migrated through Spain to Southern France, then to the princely courts further north. Style and character types were adopted, but Europeans exchanged an Arab cult of chastity with a feudalism-aligned love service, mysticism was removed, and Arab slave girls gave way for European women of the leisure class.⁶³

This amalgam of influences spawned astoundingly popular fiction that let Europeans discuss their “current social problems relating to love.”⁶⁴ When the transitional period of the First Sexual Revolution was over, “courtly love becomes attenuated and disappears.”⁶⁵ The romance genre itself continued to enthrall commoners for centuries—Icelanders well into the modern era.⁶⁶ Critics may have found these romances to be aesthetically inferior compared to the most famous Icelandic sagas,⁶⁷ but judging by manuscript transmission, this was “the most popular genre in Iceland through the centuries.”⁶⁸

Written romances were expensive. As these stories helped Norse aristocrats internalize the new era’s mating morality, romance values and norms migrated to the ballad.⁶⁹ This format, too, likely developed among the higher classes before being embraced by commoners, who did so with exceptional eagerness; Scandinavia has Europe’s “richest and most important” ballad tradition.⁷⁰ The Tristan legend made its way to a line of Nordic ballads,⁷¹ the most notable of which is *Tristrams kvæði*. Songs that everyone chimed in on let communities synchronize their beliefs while engaging in ritualistic movement, that is, dance. In the same century as that in which romances were introduced, a dance craze caught the region.⁷² By around 1300, “dancing and other ‘wanton folly’ [had become] common amusements.”⁷³ Instead of keeping unrelated bachelors away from unmarried women—which was common in kinship societies—communities arranged musical events that encouraged romantic mingling as an alternative to purely arranged marriages. Bengt Jonsson concludes that the spread and popularity of ballads built on the foundation that was laid by the Norwegian court from the thirteenth century on.⁷⁴

This medieval transition attests to how integral mating markets are to our social orders. The cultural effect of romances attests to how powerful an incentive female sexuality can be when men must be convinced to adopt new mores and morality. King Hákon appears to have understood these dynamics. His personal saga and *King’s Mirror* spell out how his governance was based on insights into the strong connection between Church MFPs and feudalism.⁷⁵ Admittedly, there were “few direct signs of a courtly love culture at King Hákon’s court,”⁷⁶ but the literate reformer must have suspected how fiction can influence communities over time. His innovative cultural program let Norsemen vicariously experience idealized courts, whose norms and values would inform how the Norse eventually internalized a new mating morality as well as the impersonal—prosociality of a new Europe.

In these first two chapters, I have analyzed literature centered on elites. Sagas and romances promoted the ideal that superior men should settle for one lifelong pair-bond. The resulting sexual egalitarianism underpinned the modern world.⁷⁷ These elites also served as role models. How even the

knightliest of knights, like Tristram, were meant to only have one mate should make it easier for lower-status men to accept similar chastity. An important difference between the men at the top of society and those at the bottom was that the poor had to accumulate resources before they could marry, which pushed their marriage age up toward 30. Men and women of the lower classes were meant to spend the preceding years in celibacy. In the next chapter, I investigate the mating marginalization of mid-millennium incels who are impelled by a raunchy school play to accept the restrictive imperatives of companionate love.

Notes

- 1 Caroline W. Bynum, "Did the Twelfth Century Discover the Individual?" *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 31.1 (1980): 1–17; Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.
- 2 *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*, 223. Hereafter, only page number in parenthesis for *Tristrams saga*.
- 3 Scholars have offered a variety of suggestions for how courtly love relates to consent, gender equality, Christianity, feudalism, and modernity itself; Singer, *The Nature of Love 2*; Boase, *The Origin and Meaning of Courtly Love*; E. Jane Burns, "Courtly Love: Who Needs It? Recent Feminist Work in the Medieval French Tradition," *Signs* 27.1 (2001): 23–57; Norbert Elias, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation* (Basel: Haus zum Falken, 1939); Jennifer G. Wollock, *Rethinking Chivalry and Courtly Love* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011); C. S. Lewis, *The Allegory of Love* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1936).
- 4 Gaston Paris, "Etudes sur les romans de la table ronde: Lancelot du Lac," *Romania* 12 (1883): 459–534.
- 5 Irving Singer suggests that sentimental endings should be understood as a consequence of transmission preferences. Romances with happy endings were not retold as eagerly as the Tristan legend, Singer argues, as its "tragedy of hopeless love speaks to a level of our being that distrusts the wish-fulfillments" that characterize many similar tales; Singer, *The Nature of Love 2*, 121.
- 6 Singer, *The Nature of Love 2*, 27.
- 7 Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.
- 8 Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love*.
- 9 Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*.
- 10 Primogeniture gives preference to the firstborn. Legitimacy gives preference to children conceived within marriage.
- 11 Jürg Glauser, "Romance (translated *riddarasögur*)," in Rory McTurk, ed., *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 372–87; Marianne E. Kalinke, "The Introduction of the Arthurian Legend in Scandinavia," in Marianne E. Kalinke, ed., *The Arthur of the North: The Arthurian Legend in the Norse and Rus' Realms* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), 5–21, 14; Rikhardsdóttir, *Emotion in Old Norse Literature*, 56; Hans Jacob Orning, "The Reception and Adaptation of Courtly Culture in Old Norse Society: Changing Conceptions of Hierarchy and Networks in Two Versions of *Tristrams Saga*," in Jón Viðar Sigurðsson and Thomas Småberg, eds., *Friendship and Social Networks in Scandinavia, c. 1000–1800* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 116; Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*;

- C. Stephen Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness: Civilizing Trends and the Formation of Courtly Ideals 939–1210* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).
- 12 Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, 183.
 - 13 *Sverris saga*, ed. Gustav Indrebø (Oslo: Norsk Historisk Kjeldeskriftinstitut, 1920), ch. 104.
 - 14 *Sverris saga*, ch. 98.
 - 15 *Sverris saga*, ch. 193.
 - 16 Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, 60.
 - 17 *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar*, in Guðbrandur Vigfússon, ed., *Rerum Britannicarum mediæ ævi scriptores* 88.2 (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1887), 11.
 - 18 Alison Finlay, “Intolerable Love: *Tristrams Saga* and the Carlisle *Tristan* Fragment,” *Medium Ævum* 73.2 (2004): 205–24.
 - 19 The saga’s opening lines convey the circumstances of its creation. Some scholars have questioned the veracity of these claims, as “quasi-historical legitimizing introductions were not uncommon”; Orning, “The Reception,” 115. The scholarly consensus is that, likely, the saga was, as it states, “translated into the Norse tongue at the behest and decree of King Hákon when 1226 years had passed since the birth of Christ”; *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*, 31; Kalinke, “The Introduction,” 10.
 - 20 Among Robert’s influential changes is making King Markis a nobler, better liked, and more Church MFP-aligned monarch than what he is in Thomas’s version. Negative or ambiguous king portrayals were often influenced by how many romances were written in aristocratic rather than royal milieus “during a period when the kings of France sought to extend the bounds of their sovereignty”; Geraldine Barnes, “Scandinavian Versions of Arthurian Romance,” in Helen Fulton, ed., *A Companion to Arthurian Literature* (Malden: Wiley, 2009), 189–201, 191.
 - 21 Peter Jorgensen, “Introduction,” in Marianne E. Kalinke, ed., *Norse Romance: 1. The Tristan Legend* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 25–6, 26; Finlay, “Intolerable Love.”
 - 22 For an earlier version of this interpretation, see Mads Larsen, “Courtliness as Morality of Modernity in Norse Romance,” *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture* 6.2 (2022): 43–56.
 - 23 Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.
 - 24 Orning, “The Reception,” 116.
 - 25 *Ívens saga*, in Marianne E. Kalinke, ed. and trans., *Norse Romance: II. Knights of the Round Table* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 33–102, 87.
 - 26 Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, 218.
 - 27 *Erex saga*, in Marianne E. Kalinke, ed. and trans., *Norse Romance: II. Knights of the Round Table* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 217–65, 243.
 - 28 David M. Buss and David P. Schmitt, “Evolutionary Psychology and Feminism,” *Sex Roles* 64 (2011): 768–87; Buss and Schmitt, “Sexual Strategies Theory.”
 - 29 Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness*, 5.
 - 30 Jean Frappier, “Vues sur les conceptions courtoises dans les littératures d’oc et d’oil au XIIe siècle,” *Cahiers de Civilisation Médiévale* 2.6 (1959): 135–56, 149.
 - 31 Kjær, “*Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar*.”
 - 32 C. Stephen Jaeger, “The Barons’ Intrigue in Gottfried’s *Tristan*: Notes toward a Sociology of Fear in Court Society,” *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 83.1 (1984): 46–66, 62.

- 33 Lotte J. L. Wilms, “Tristan and Isolde’s Big Move to Iceland: The Cultural Differences Between *Tristan* by Thomas of Britain and *Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar* by Brother Róbert,” thesis, Utrecht University, 2009, 6.
- 34 Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.
- 35 Singer, *The Nature of Love* 2, 28.
- 36 Kjær, “Tristrams saga ok Ísöndar.”
- 37 These stories are set in an idealized, mythical past, which embodies the norms and values of Europe’s future. The mythical King Arthur was first portrayed as a post-Roman king of Britain in the late fifth and early sixth centuries.
- 38 *Parcevals saga*, in Marianne E. Kalinke, ed., *Norse Romance: II. Knights of the Round Table*, trans. Helen Maclean (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 103–216, 113.
- 39 Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, 218.
- 40 Apostolou, “Sexual Selection Under Parental Choice in Agropastoral Societies,” 46.
- 41 Apostolou, *Sexual Selection in Homo Sapiens*; Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*.
- 42 Buss and Schmitt, “Sexual Strategies Theory.”
- 43 E. T. Donaldson, “The Myth of Courtly Love,” *Ventures* 5 (1965): 16–23.
- 44 Peter Dronke, *Medieval Latin and the Rise of European Love Lyric*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965–66), xvii.
- 45 Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, *The Woman That Never Evolved* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).
- 46 The First Sexual Revolution promoted the idea that the emotions and concerns of the individual should inform mate choice to a greater extent than the needs of family or kin. Importantly, the only mate choice on the menu was one lifelong pair-bond. After the Second Sexual Revolution, individuals were freer to choose the same pair-bond with less parental influence. The Third Sexual Revolution promoted the idea that people could choose long- and short-term mates based on individual concerns and desires. Such individual freedom is highly anomalous compared to how previous human communities have organized mating.
- 47 For humans, the intense phase of pair-bonding attraction—or love—typically lasts 12–18 months. A weakened sensation can continue for additional years; Donatella Marazziti et al., “Alteration of the Platelet Serotonin Transporter in Romantic Love,” *Psychological Medicine* 29 (1999): 741–5. Intense love evolved to motivate our hominin ancestors to copulate, pursue reproduction, and stay together through the pregnancy and the offspring’s most vulnerable phase. Serial pairing, as opposed to lifelong monogamy, offered genetic variety that probably made the practice adaptive. Having children with multiple partners also offered social advantages through creating a larger network of alliances; Edward B. Tylor, “On a Method of Investigating the Development of Institutions: Applied to Laws of Marriage and Descent,” *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 18 (1889): 245–72; Ernestine Friedl, *Women and Men: An Anthropologist’s View* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975). Partner switching allowed males with increasing status to seek someone younger and healthier. Ascending females were given the chance to pursue men with greater resources, a pattern we recognize today. In contrast to our modern ecology of nuclear, urban families—with large health and educational costs, and other burdens that come with step-parenting—nomadic, communal living involved less friction as partners were switched.

64 *Promoting Courtly Love*

- 48 Fisher, *Anatomy of Love*; United Nations Statistics Division, *Demographic Yearbook*.
- 49 Rikhardsdottir, *Emotion in Old Norse Literature*, 49.
- 50 Geraldine Barnes, "The Tristan Legend," in Marianne E. Kalinke, ed., *The Arthur of the North: The Arthurian Legend in the Norse and Rus' Realms* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), 61–76, 64.
- 51 Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983).
- 52 Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, 192.
- 53 Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages* (New York: Doubleday, 1954).
- 54 Singer, *The Nature of Love 2*, 29, 36, xiii.
- 55 Baumard et al. connect economic growth to the emergence of romantic ideologies, such as courtly love. The mechanism for this cultural change is not that richer people are better able to philosophize ways of harmonizing sexual impulses with religious concerns. Prosperity motivates people to invest more in their offspring, which is encouraged through a sanctification of the pair-bond; Baumard et al., "The Cultural Evolution of Love in Literary History."
- 56 Henrich coined the acronym WEIRD to bring attention to how claims of psychological universals often build on research conducted exclusively on American undergraduates or other populations who are Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic; Henrich et al., "The Weirdest People in the World?"
- 57 Glauser, "Romance"; Kalinke, "The Introduction," 14; Rikhardsdottir, *Emotion in Old Norse Literature*, 56; Orning, "The Reception," 116; Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*; Jaeger, *The Origins of Courtliness*.
- 58 Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*.
- 59 Boase, *The Origin and Meaning of Courtly Love*, 128.
- 60 Raffield et al., "Male-Biased Operational Sex Ratios"; Raffield et al., "Polygyny."
- 61 Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, 87–8.
- 62 *Möttuls saga*, in Marianne E. Kalinke, ed. and trans., *Norse Romance: II. Knights of the Round Table* (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 1–31, 29.
- 63 Boase, *The Origin and Meaning of Courtly Love*; Singer, *The Nature of Love 2*.
- 64 Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, 192.
- 65 Singer, *The Nature of Love 2*, 35.
- 66 A second wave of romance translations at a Norse court occurred in the early 1300s. Queen Eufemia, wife of Hákon Magnússon, had three romances turned into Old Swedish verse; Olle Ferm et al. eds., *The Eufemiavisor and Courtly Culture* (Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, 2015). Around 150 post-medieval romances are thought to have been composed in Iceland, some as late as in the nineteenth century; Matthew Driscoll, *The Unwashed Children of Eve: The Production, Dissemination and Reception of Popular Literature in Post-Reformation Iceland* (Enfield Lock: Hisarlik Press, 1997).
- 67 Stephen A. Michell, *Heroic Sagas and Ballads* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 8.
- 68 Marianne Kalinke, "Norse Romance (*Riddarasögur*)," in Carol J. Clover and John Lindow, eds., *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 316–63, 316.
- 69 Not all ballad types sanctified courtly ideals. Kin ballads aligned with kinship society ideology, but staged the individual costs of adhering to such ideals.

- A central conflict in all forms of ballads was the power struggle that occurred as a result of the contest between individual and parental choice. Church MFPs were highly influential, as fidelity is a moral imperative in all ballad types. Rape was a common topic. When honor was the dominant theme, revenge was required. When love was dominant, honor could be won back through marriage. Most Danish ballads are of the true love type; David W. Colbert, "The Middle Ages," in Sven H. Rossel, ed., *A History of Danish Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 1–70.
- 70 Erich Seemann, "Introduction," in Erich Seemann, Dag Strömbach, and Bengt R. Jonsson, eds., *European Folk Ballads* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1967), xi–xxxii, xiii; Sven H. Rossel, *Scandinavian Ballads* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Department of Scandinavian Studies, 1982); David Colbert, *The Birth of the Ballad: The Scandinavian Medieval Genre* (Stockholm: Svenskt Visarkiv, 1989). Ballad means "dancing song"; Seemann, "Introduction," xi.
- 71 The terms "Norse" and "Nordic" generally refer to the same geographical region, but denote different time periods. At some point between the mid-fourteenth-century Black Plague and the mid-millennium early modern transition, the Norse became Nordic.
- 72 Colbert, "The Middle Ages," 50–1.
- 73 Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, 223. Scholars are unsure of precisely when romances and ballads moved from the aristocratic sphere to a more popular embrace among commoners. Ballads appear to have reached Scandinavia in the early thirteenth century. The Reformation could have been a turning point in terms of class. After 1650, there is little aristocratic interest in dancing to ballads, which by then long had been a peasant tradition; Rossel, *Scandinavian Ballads*, 5.
- 74 Bengt R. Jonsson, "Bråvalla och Lena: Kring balladen SMB 56, I," *Sumlen* (1989): 49–166, 64–72; Bengt R. Jonsson, "Oral Literature, Written Literature, and the Ballad: Relations between Old Norse Genres," in Joseph Harris, ed., *The Ballad and Oral Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 139–70, 152–5.
- 75 *King's Mirror* warns that when chieftains fail to submit under one king, women get raped, people have illicit sex, and children are born outside of wedlock. *Hákon's Saga* lists as Hákon's defining achievements how he prohibited kin feuds, ended shared kin liability for crimes, and made Norway inhospitable to men who took other men's wives.
- 76 Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, 219.
- 77 Christakis, *Blueprint*; Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.

3 Companionate Love & the Nuptial Valve

Urban Incels in *The Unfaithful Wife* (c. 1500)

Courtly love offered compelling but unrealistic aspirations for medieval Europeans looking to pair-bond. The lucky ones might get to marry someone they feel strong love for, but such emotions mostly do not last a lifetime or prevent you from ever desiring someone else. In an impoverished environment, giving in to erotic or romantic impulses could have detrimental consequences for you and your family. People were generally better off if they stuck to the one partner they had been assigned for life. The pragmatic mating morality of companionate love compelled couples to see themselves as partners in the venture of securing enough calories and resources to keep as many of their children alive as they could. Necessity made our agricultural-age ancestors suppress many of those romantic and sexual desires that our forager ancestors had been able to live out more freely. Yet no morality—however well-meant or useful—is able to fully subdue those impulses that motivate us to act in line with our deepest evolutionary purpose, which is to replicate DNA. To reconcile our biological imperatives with cultural demands, fiction can play a part, as attested to by a bawdy school play that half a millennium ago was performed for drunk apprentices at taverns across the Danish town of Odense.

I began the previous chapters by trying to make you invest emotionally in the protagonist of my case study. This narrative device can draw readers into both fiction and essays about fiction. This time I will not, as neither “The Unfaithful Wife” nor her suitors were crafted to be complex individuals. In spite of all characters primarily representing a class,¹ *The Unfaithful Wife* (*Den utro hustru*, c. 1500) offers impressively realistic drama—not psychologically, but in terms of human nature and mating behavior. This pre-Reformation school play engages its era’s existential threat to the European Marriage Pattern (EMP),² doing so with exceptional insight and honesty. The looser sex morals of the fifteenth century were made possible by post-Black Death population sparsity.³ “Concubinage, prostitution, adultery, fornication, and homosexuality flourished,” writes Richard Posner, yet there was “little interference from church or

state.”⁴ Europeans could afford to be less restrained in terms of sex, but only until Malthusian pressures reinstated themselves.⁵ During antiquity, infanticide had functioned as a fourth-trimester abortion that kept population numbers in check.⁶ The Christian prohibition against infant murder necessitated strong restrictions on people’s sexuality. I interpret the fierce Reformation-era contest over sex morals in this context, as a struggle to rein back European promiscuity before population growth brought about catastrophe.⁷ Fortuitously, the EMP would not unravel until after the Second Sexual Revolution, when industrial revolutions and mass-scale emigration could absorb the population surplus. Had the EMP’s nuptial valve burst two centuries earlier, the Western progression toward modernity would likely have derailed.⁸

The Unfaithful Wife is an explicit farce that reflects its era’s promiscuity. It was performed by and for drunk young men at Shrovetide. During this Northern European Carnival, society’s morals could be mocked and questioned.⁹ The around half-hour-long play was probably written by a university-educated teacher around 1500 and staged by late-teen students from Our Lady’s School in Odense. On the eve before Lent, around ten student-actors would sledge from guild party to guild party, performing *The Unfaithful Wife* to earn food and alcohol, in addition to cash that was much needed this time of year.¹⁰ The play was “not a didactic school play, but one aimed at their physical survival.”¹¹ These circumstances did not lend themselves to using the era’s common dramatical format—didactic plays—which sought to instill Christian morals through spelling these out to audiences. To elicit charity from drunk craftsmen and their apprentices, Shrovetide farces had to side with the worldview of these men and offer entertainment that they would appreciate.¹² Leif Søndergaard writes that it is “the craftsmen’s living conditions and way of thinking that are reflected in *The Unfaithful Wife*, in structure and motifs as well as in dramaturgy and values.”¹³

The play uses low-brow, physical humor to craft its thematic argument. It ultimately sides with Church MFPs, but only after having revealed how women discriminate against low-value men like those in the audience. Uncommitted copulation is portrayed as something men of all classes pursue eagerly and without the courtly pretensions that romances prescribe. Women control men’s access to this coveted good, and they use the female power advantage on short-term markets to maximize their own outcome. Through this courtship comedy, the playwright portrays male and female mate preferences in a manner that aligns with evolutionary insights. A certain man and woman are not each other’s destined true loves. Instead, opportunities on short- and long-term markets are distributed informed by the participants’ mate value and the sexes’ market power.

The Unfaithful Wife conveys precise insights into how men and women face different challenges when pursuing copulation and/or pair-bonding. While women have easy access to casual sex, many men have little to no access to female sexuality outside of relationships. This stark difference in erotic opportunity results from how the sexes faced distinct pressures in our evolutionary past. The divide between men's and women's minimum parental investment empowered females to be the sexual selectors, which is common across animal groups. Because males could get away with contributing little more than sperm, male psychology evolved a stronger preference for promiscuity and partner variety.¹⁴ Because having many mates increases a man's likelihood of earning a large genetic legacy, genes that drive promiscuity spread through the male population. Women faced a different equation. Because sex exposes females to the risk of pregnancy and years of childrearing, female psychology has evolved more discriminatory preferences on short-term markets. Consequently, mostly the highest-value men are able to arouse women's promiscuous attraction system. The evolutionary rationale is that if sperm is to be the male's only contribution, at least he should offer good genes, for which being attractive is a proxy.

On long-term markets, men and women are on more equal footing but have evolved to prioritize different partner qualities. Women are more drawn to mates with resources who signal a willingness to invest these in her and their potential offspring. Men are—on both long- and short-term markets—more attracted to cues of fertility, such as youth and good looks.¹⁵ In sum—relative to the other sex—men evolved to view women more as sex objects, and women to view most men more as resource providers. The sexes' mate preferences significantly overlap, but their distinctions are so consequential that they amount to create one of the largest psychological sex differences. This has set the stage for an eternal drama. Our mate preferences drive both cooperation and conflict—intra- and intersexually—as a consequence of men's and women's overlapping and opposing interests.¹⁶ The potential for dysfunction is considerable. Every social order must incorporate cultural mechanisms that channel the sexes' mate preferences into functional behavior. Primarily, communities want to reproduce their numbers, avoid too intense competition over women, and facilitate pair-bonds that drive productivity.

In mid-millennium Odense, as across the West, the EMP underpinned a functional equilibrium. Population growth was kept in check by how people had to accumulate resources before they could marry. This nuptial valve shortened women's reproductive period.¹⁷ The imposition of lifelong monogamy restrained competition over women and motivated greater investment in each child, which, in the long run, drove per-capita growth.¹⁸ Companionate love posited that couples first of all were partners

in the enterprises of production and reproduction.¹⁹ Individuals influenced mate choice, but marriages were primarily arranged. Spouses might start out with feelings of love or develop them over time, but when no such emotions arose, or when they had subsided, or were replaced by loathing, this was no justification for divorce or extrapair copulation. Environmental demands required pragmatism, not giving in to erotic or romantic impulses. This latter aspect of the EMP, its fidelity demands, was increasingly challenged in the fifteenth century, but post-Plague European communities could still absorb a relatively high level of sexual laxness.

Women's strong discrimination on short-term markets made uncommitted copulation available mostly to a minority of the most attractive men.²⁰ For the majority of men, their best option was to labor hard to earn access to female sexuality and companionship through marriage, but this required patience. *The Unfaithful Wife* offers sympathy to one of the era's most marginalized groups. Not only were urban apprentices too poor to marry, but guild rules reserved marriage for master craftsmen.²¹ Making matters worse, towns often had a male surplus of up to 25%,²² a sex ratio that heightened intramale competition. Many of *The Unfaithful Wife*'s male audiences would eventually pair-bond, but others would suffer lifelong bachelorhood.²³ For men—and women—to accept such deprivation through their teens and twenties—or longer—having convincing cultural ideals was paramount. In the sexually permissive fifteenth century, being among those excluded from mating must have been extra challenging. The playwright reveals the hypocrisy of courtly love and the discriminatory distribution of late-medieval promiscuity, but still encourages urban incels to submit to the restrictive tenets of the EMP. Through connecting short-term mating success to witches and devils, the play warns men against how giving in to promiscuous impulses could result in harm to their community.

A Century and a Half of Critical Disagreement

The Unfaithful Wife is the story of an urban wife who is left to fend off suitors when her husband goes on a pilgrimage. She rejects a filthy farmer, a horny monk, and a nobleman who hires a witch who conjures devils to aid his courtship. The wife gives in to the nobleman after the witch tells her how a similarly prudish woman was transformed into a crying dog. These events have confounded scholars since Birket Smith first published the play in 1874.²⁴ Critics emphasize two questions: why does the wife cheat, and what does the ending mean?

Smith finds the play to offer insignificant answers. The wife faces stronger courtship weapons as her suitors progress in terms of class—until she gives in.²⁵ The nobleman's "good words and payment" to the witch ensures his

victory.²⁶ Smith finds the ending “peculiar,” as he struggles to make sense of “the many extremely crude lines” and the playwright’s joking attitude toward “repeated attacks on a married woman’s virtue.” He can say little about the moral apart from it being distinct from those of the era’s serious dramas: “The moral is predominantly a joke.”²⁷ Torben Krogh noted that “like most of these farces, this too is actually more like a dramatized anecdote.”²⁸ This appraisal was a step up from how N. M. Petersen had dismissed the play as a mere translation of a German work, “without any aesthetic value.”²⁹ These surface explorations align with how, in regard to the Nordics’ small number of extant medieval plays, “the debate over authorship . . . has received far more attention than the texts themselves.”³⁰

In 1950, Hans Brix rejected the title that Smith had added to the untitled manuscript. The wife should not be described as unfaithful, as she is “a praiseworthy example of marital fidelity.”³¹ She cheats only because the witch deceives her with the crying dog. Brix places the story in the Renaissance tradition of tales that prescribe how a woman’s chastity can be overcome, but finds the play as a whole to adhere to the courtly tradition. In the resolution, the nobleman is no longer playing the short-term mating market but proposes “with hand and heart,” ready to replace her husband.³² A generation later, also Marvin Carlson concluded that the protagonist is a “tender-hearted wife” who never wanted to cheat.³³

In his seminal study from 1989, Søndergaard inverted this perspective. All along, the wife

had the intention of cheating, and she has no scruples with using her sexuality to find the man that can provide her with the greatest advantage. By first holding back as part of the sexual game, she increases her value in the eyes of the nobleman.³⁴

Graham Caie read her cheating to be a warning to husbands against going on needless pilgrimages. The audience is “made to feel that infidelity is sanctioned in a wife with such a neglectful and stupid husband.”³⁵ Larry Søndergaard too found Søndergaard unconvincing,³⁶ as did Kimberly La Palm, who interpreted the wife to consent “not out of desire or disregard for her marriage vows, but out of fear of retribution.” La Palm adds that “there is no lesson to be learned here—the situation is simply ridiculous.” The ending “could hardly be called a resolution and is more of an elaborate joke.”³⁷

I view this critical disagreement not to attest to the play’s lack of aesthetic value, a stance that will be supported by my interpretation. The work’s realistic portrayal of mating allows critics to project whichever morality they profess into the farce. The ideological progression from romantic to confluent love, as well as different waves of feminism, have

influenced critics. With regard to no part of human sociality, I argue, do we delude ourselves more strongly than in matters of mating. We did not evolve to acquire an accurate understanding of ourselves and others; we evolved to believe what is adaptive, that is, what promotes survival and reproduction. To reconcile our current environment with impulses instilled into our lineage millions of years ago, strong cultural indoctrination is required, as it is no small request to have people take upon themselves the burdens that come with decades of pair-bonding and child-rearing. The above criticisms attest to the thick ideological glasses that are imposed on us by our community.

Unlike Syndergaard, I do not consider the play's authorial intent to be inaccessible to modern minds.³⁸ An evolutionary approach helps us see past our own ideology to identify universal predispositions that—while they express themselves differently in distinct environments—offer a stability of underlying motivations that helps us interpret mating behavior across time and place. The playwright's folk psychology let him dissect what drives men and women on short- and long-term markets. A unique moment in time allowed him to turn his insights into compelling drama. Around 1500, Danish townspeople experienced a mix of cultural impulses that permitted independent thought and communication on copulation and pair-bonding to an extent that would not return until the eighteenth century.³⁹ Late-medieval pragmatism with regard to nonsanctioned sex waned in Germany from around 1470 but continued in Denmark until the 1510s.⁴⁰ In 1479, the universities of Copenhagen and Uppsala opened, just as “the new ideas of humanism were sweeping northward. With no previously established scholastic tradition to offer resistance.”⁴¹ Around 1500, Danish university graduates brought their humanistic ethos to secondary schools, like *Our Lady in Odense*. Humanistic storytelling strives to motivate audiences to draw their own conclusions rather than telling them what to think—a stance that informs the composition of *The Unfaithful Wife*.

In Denmark, a lack of literate craftsmen had resulted in the demand for Shrovetide plays being met by schools instead of guilds as in Germany.⁴² This Danish tradition seems to go back at least to the 1440s.⁴³ *The Unfaithful Wife* is the only extant Nordic Shrovetide farce, suggest Søndergaard and La Palm, because the Protestant church likely set out to destroy all such manuscripts after the Reformation.⁴⁴ There may have been other plays that combined humanism and sexual permissiveness, but these are lost. This one surviving play thus offers a rare window into a medieval mental world that attempts to make sense of a pair-bonding regime under increasing pressure as an economic boom drove population growth. The EMP's imposition of prolonged celibacy after puberty also aligned poorly with human nature. When *The Unfaithful Wife* was being performed

across Odense, it was not given that post-Reformation Europeans would succeed in retightening the EMP.

We know not to what extent the Danish author was consciously aware of these stakes. Storytellers can internalize their era's important questions in a manner that lets their narratives embody timely conflicts without the author knowing precisely how or why. My evolutionary criticism will show that, at some level, the playwright understood the risks inherent with high levels of promiscuity. In his staging of this problematic, he does not offer psychological realism, as the era's dramatic format was too undeveloped for credible characterization. The wife's dialogue opens up for a variety of interpretations in terms of psychological motivation. Her actions, however, and those of her suitors, make sense in light of our species' evolutionary past. Audiences are compelled to conclude that although we are driven to behave in certain ways, such impulses must not justify that we *should* behave in those ways, which is a perennially relevant lesson with regard to mating.

The Wife and Her Three Suitors

The play begins with a presenter who quiets the feasting audience before summing up the narrative.⁴⁵ In a tone informed by how the play was "intended for a lower-class audience,"⁴⁶ he concludes:

Anyone who'll not keep quiet,
Or will not watch the play,
I'll give him such a kick on the arse
It'll ache the rest of the day (37–40)⁴⁷

In a sharp break of tone, the husband character declares, "Wife of my heart, and jewel of my mind, / To me you've ever been true and kind" (41–2). Critics have noted several such breaks between parts. These could be informed by the play being based on "four or five different sources."⁴⁸ However, since the playwright appears more than competent enough to adjust tone, I propose we view these breaks as intentional. Brix does too, finding that the play begins and ends in the courtly tradition, but that "nature breaks through" once the suitors show up.⁴⁹ Courtly ideology had long since achieved its functions. By 1500, courtly manners probably would have appeared ridiculous to low-status apprentices. The playwright's tonal changes align with this worldview of the precariat. While lower-class characters are given "brief and witty" lines, higher-class ones speak with "long-drawn solemnity, almost pathetically."⁵⁰ By connecting courtly verbiage to a marriage about to fail, the playwright prepares for a more realistic portrayal of male–female relations. After the husband's

self-important declaration of having to go on a pilgrimage to make up for the couple's "many pleasures and much mirth" (48), his wife responds,

My world's honor, my heart's cheer,
You are my noble husband dear;
Whatever you wish, I wish so too,
Whatever you think is best to do (57–60)

A long-time wife being so verbally accommodating may fit the courtly genre, but perhaps few real-life marriages. The husband bids adieu, "So live now chastely, as you should; / As you have been ever, so now be good" (95–6).⁵¹ Immediately, a farmer approaches the wife, encouraging, "get yourself another man" (115). She mentions no lack of lust but fears "dishonor and shame" and that "my husband would me justly hate" (119, 121). The farmer drops the pretense, what Brix referred to as "nature breaks through." He appeals to her sense of fairness. Since she has the power on the illicit short-term market on which they now interact, she should show pity: "Don't be mean, since you have got / of beauty such a share" (129–30). Knowing he has no high status to offer, the farmer attempts to sell himself as a capable lover: "If I might mount you for a while / that's the best way I can woo" (139–40).

The wife curses him out. Being propositioned to copulate with a lower-class man repulses her: "a country lout of the kind you are / Farting among horses is better far" (143–4). She insults him for being an "ancient corpse completely worn [with] a foul, long, pointed beard / And your shitty legs need a wash" (147, 151–2). From a modern, humanistic perspective, we could criticize her cruel response, but women are incentivized to mistreat suitors with low mate value. Especially when the competition over women is high, imposing costs on suitors helps reduce the courting pressure on women. For a woman of the burgher class, a farmer's expression of lust could also be interpreted as diminishing her mate value. On long-term markets, in monogamous regimes, humans practice assortative mating, that is, to pair-bond with someone of similar value.⁵² On short-term markets, women tend to use their market power to select men with higher value.⁵³ Their primary motivation for extrapair copulation seems to be to screen men as new potential long-term partners, although other motivations may also play in.⁵⁴ David Buss concludes, "The *mate-switching hypothesis*, I believe, provides a scientifically supported answer—that women have affairs to extricate themselves from a poor mateship and trade up to a better partner."⁵⁵

The farmer appears ignorant of these dynamics. To further discourage his advances, the wife confronts him with already having a wife, which he denies, true to the farce genre.⁵⁶ Søndergaard makes a point of how the

play's courtship "conveys how men view women. The woman is made to be an *object* for the man's advances."⁵⁷ I propose that it is more illuminating to view male-centered literary portrayals of mating dynamics not as objectification but as an exercise in *theory of mind*, the ability to mentalize how others think.⁵⁸ As Europe's psychological-institutional coevolution intensified, an important function of fiction was to offer people windows into the interiority of others.⁵⁹ Made-up stories functioned as dojos that let audiences practice their theory of mind.⁶⁰ With the new European man being increasingly in charge of his own mate selection—and attraction—learning to discern "what women want" was crucial. After the Second Sexual Revolution, the modern novel would offer similar insights into the minds of men, an example of which I will analyze in Chapter 6.

The farmer's theory of mind is comically weak, as he interprets the wife's criticism as being constructive and goes to a bathhouse to clean himself. The sauna attendant continues the abuse, smearing the farmer with filth and singeing his beard with a candle. The scene is written for an audience that found peasants "ridiculous and contemptible."⁶¹ Being low on the urban totem pole, apprentices were driven to put themselves above those rural men whom they had left behind to seek a better life. In reality, apprentices could probably identify with being ignored and mocked by women. Such degrading was an important element of the *grotesque realism* that marks these farces.⁶² Humiliation was meant to discourage low-status men from pursuing female sexuality. The attendant lies to the cleaned-up farmer, "In all the best circles you can go anywhere, / And no one will notice you don't belong there" (189–90).

The wife again rejects the farmer, "No, you're uglier . . . And I wish you'd have an accident" (193, 196). La Palm points out that "the farmer, who is the lowest level, actually works the hardest to win the woman's affection."⁶³ As long as this labor does not affect how the woman perceives his status or attractiveness, the farmer's efforts are to no avail. The willed accident comes in the form of his suddenly appearing wife, who drags him home by his hair. She insults his manliness by letting the abandoned wife know that the farmer has not had sex with her for four years. Critics interpret this as impotence,⁶⁴ a common farce topic. In the contemporary school play, *Play About a Doctor (Spil om en doktor)*, another farmer has stopped copulating with his wife. When magic makes her young again, he is motivated to rejuvenate his "eleventh finger."⁶⁵ Farces from this era facilitated a public discourse around the challenges of companionate love. Several extant works center their thematic arguments on marital challenges, such as infidelity, domestic power, and "men and women's rights in the sexual arena."⁶⁶ Couples growing sexually tired of each other is a predictable outcome of lifelong monogamy—in spite of the courtly insistence on true love leading to everlasting passion. For the low-status farmer,

clandestine extrapair copulation appears to be his only appealing sexual outlet, but his low position deprives him of any such opportunity.

The next suitor is a Dominican monk. When this order arrived in Denmark three centuries earlier, they were meant only to rely on alms but began to accumulate property and wealth. When the mid-millennium Church attempted to retighten morals, promiscuous clergy and monks became targets for people's hatred. Monks were accused of being more interested in "material goods like food, drinks, and sexual excesses than in religious values."⁶⁷ For young men who had chosen crafts instead of religious celibacy, competing against monks on the clandestine mating market must have felt especially disheartening. *The Unfaithful Wife* follows farce conventions when the monk offers to throw away his robe to reveal his handsome manliness.⁶⁸

The wife again interprets the offer as undermining her mate value. The monk may be more attractive than the farmer, but should she "go to bed with a holy brother, [she would get] all kinds of trouble and bother" (225–6). The fact that she abuses the monk less severely suggests that she finds him to be a better match—but not the optimal one. Having experienced how much power she has on the short-term market, the wife contemplates, "If I really would my virtue waste, / A courtier would better suit my taste" (227–8). To what extent these lines reveal a conscious will to cheat I offer no opinion on. Like with all drama, much would depend on how the actors played their part.⁶⁹

A nobleman appears and dominates the monk verbally, beats him, and tears off his robe. The play establishes a clear hierarchy. In promiscuous regimes, this is often how animals distribute mating opportunities, by having males fight over pecking order so that females know with whom to mate. Had this contest been informed by heroic love, the nobleman may have felt entitled to rape a woman who lacked sufficient male protection. This late-medieval nobleman respects female consent. He even signals honestly that his interest is purely short-term: "I find myself inclined to pleasure; / I'd give you joy beyond all measure" (249–50). This crude proposition suggests that his theory of mind is suboptimally strong, but his status sweetens the offer. In line with Buss's mate-switching hypothesis, the wife seems to open up for extrapair sex as a means for entering into a new pair-bond. Yet she cannot simply switch—not in mid-millennium Odense—and this is not what the nobleman offers. She respectfully rejects him,

I have a husband as you know.
I promised him I would be true,
And upon my soul that will I do.
I trust you will not angry be,
But that you leave, it is my plea (266–70)

Her insistence on remaining chaste seems a prudent strategy. If she wants to replace her husband, she must consider male mate preferences. Men are evolutionarily invested in reducing paternity uncertainty to avoid wasting often precarious resources on other men's offspring. Sexual jealousy and a preference for virginity are among the male adaptations that safeguard men's genetic legacy. A third adaptation is a "preference for cues that auger well for postmating sexual fidelity and loyalty."⁷⁰ By not giving in to the nobleman's offer of short-term mating, the wife provides such a cue. Like Søndergaard noted, that "by first holding back as part of the sexual game, she increases her value in the eyes of the nobleman."⁷¹ An evolutionary approach reveals the rationale behind this game.

Witches and Devils Can Get You Laid

Conceptualizing what a witch represents is challenging for modern minds. To discern what a particular fictional one meant to drunk, horny apprentices in Odense around 1500 is an even more fraught endeavor. Throwing into the mix a few cowardly devils does not help. No wonder critics have disregarded this climax sequence as a joke, a dramatized anecdote, or simply ridiculous. I propose that we view this supernatural arena as representing the antithesis to prosocial behavior. The nobleman first flatters the old witch, then ensures, "Whatever you want, yours shall it be, / And we'll be friends, I guarantee" (275–6). Such transparently false promises attest to how he pursues a highly competitive, selfish, and deceitful strategy. He is still driven by short-term lust, merely wanting for the witch's black magic to win over the wife's will.

Because female sexuality is so valuable and inaccessible—especially at this time and place—courters could be incentivized to go too far to the detriment of social functionality.⁷² The fact that infidelity was disruptive is attested to by the many guild rules that prohibited sex with the wives, sisters, or mothers of other members.⁷³ On this point, I hang the crux of my argument with regard to the authorial intent behind the play's ending. The schoolmaster at *Our Lady*, or someone else connected to the school, adapted a handful of plays, most or all of which had been written by German craftsmen. The playwright appears to flip the chaste morality of the core play by letting the wife cheat in the end. This would enthrall his students' audiences, motivating generous donations of food, alcohol, and cash. After acknowledging the oppressive mating conditions to which low-status men are relegated, the playwright still compels these men to remain on the prosocial path. Witches lend themselves to such a thematic argument. Irrespective of which psychological or social significance a particular witch may have, this folklore figure represents in-group individuals who are perceived to threaten a community's

functionality.⁷⁴ Devils can be ascribed a similar function, as embodying norms and values that would make a society come unglued if enough people followed their antisocial example. Connecting hypercompetitive suitors to witches and devils should therefore resonate with medieval minds.

The old woman's exclusive focus on monetary compensation aligns with how her supernatural world is one of selfish desires, quid-pro-quo, and shameless deception. She conjures a devil whom she makes whisper into the wife's ear:

The flesh of a man is sheer delight,
When lying with him all the night.
A wealthy woman you'll be if you will,
Eat what you like, and drink your fill.
It's better by far to live the sweet life,
Than struggling all day with sorrow and strife (331–6)

The wife rejects this offer of sex, wealth, food, and drink. Her steadfastness makes the devil vouch for her fidelity: "No tempter can make her do any wrong. / If you made all the devils participate, / They still couldn't get her to fornicate" (344–6). The nobleman does not accept the witch's defeat, not after having paid for her services. Her final, most powerful trick is that of the weeping dog, a centuries-old European motif.⁷⁵ Brix reads the scene to convey that "when words cannot find the way, the living example can: the female heart can be moved to compassion."⁷⁶ After the witch has told the story of a chaste woman whose suitor turned her into a dog, the wife gives in: "Rather than end in this canine fashion, / I'll agree to satisfy his passion" (417–8).

Whether such a submission is psychologically credible matters less. The playwright may have tempted his audience with sex-related theory of mind, but he is not training them in the art of seduction. By dramatizing how black magic is the most effective means for the clandestine mating market, he connects success on this market to antisocial forces. The fact that only powerful magic could sway the wife appears to make the nobleman assign her greater mate value. He now insists that his intentions are long-term: "I should give you all you say / And love you till my dying day" (429–30). The two interior transformations that facilitate this outcome may, to modern readers, appear crucial to understand, as the play's body of criticism illustrates. At this time, however, the West's psychological-institutional coevolution had not yet motivated the interior obsession that would come to define modern drama. What mattered to audiences was that "the confident knight gets his desire, as does the unfaithful wife."⁷⁷

From Sexual Laxness to Puritanism

The presenter conveys through the epilog his two most pressing agendas. First, he sums up the morality that has been conveyed:

In this play you've seen and heard,
 How the witch helped the courtier get the bird.
 Now if any of you want to try this device,
 It's of the witch you should ask advice;
 The devil has taught her many an art,
 As you could see when she played her part (437–42)

That this ending is “peculiar” may be, but the moral is hardly “a joke,” as suggested by Smith and La Palm. The mid-millennium battle over MFPs had exceptionally serious stakes. No doubt, modern Westerners will be drawn to side with the sexual permissiveness of pre-Reformation thought. Female independence and sexual agency reached a level it would take centuries to surpass. *The Unfaithful Wife* and the German Shrovetide plays it built on “portray women as active agents with physical needs, not least a living sexuality.”⁷⁸ Tine De Moor and Jan Luiten van Zanden refer to the fifteenth century as “the golden days of the EMP.” The booming post-Plague labor market empowered lower-class women and men, which contributed to the era’s sexual laxness. De Moor and van Zanden locate the moral fall to occur in the sixteenth century when “there was a tendency to stress parental authority again.”⁷⁹

My evolutionary perspective makes me challenge this conclusion. The iniquitous gender consequences of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Puritanism can appear immoral from today’s perspective, but the era’s delegitimization of female sexuality was also effective. Since women are the sexually selecting sex—and less drawn to promiscuity than what men are—oppressing their sexuality is an accessible, efficacious means for reducing pre- and extramarital copulation. We will see the same dynamics in the Romantic Century (1750–1850). First, female sexuality is celebrated (Chapter 5), then delegitimized to counter a large increase in illegitimate births (Chapter 6). Were it a moral universal to let people procreate based on personal desire alone, De Moor and van Zanden would have a point. But if retightening the EMP was necessary in order to prevent Malthusian crises during periods of stagnant growth, this mating regime could not have had its golden days when its restrictions were under severe challenge. Somehow, Europeans had to match the number of mouths to feed with the calories they could produce with contemporary technology. They could have returned to infant murder or perhaps found other ways to prevent unsustainable population growth, but Christian thought made the oppression of female sexuality the most compelling means.

Early modern mating could have played out in a variety of ways. The fact that Europeans arrived at the same conclusion as *The Unfaithful Wife*—to double down on the EMP—may offend modern intuitions but seems also to have made those very intuitions possible. The sacrifices young men and women made during those centuries facilitated the environment from which we cast our modern judgment. This perspective makes Scandinavia's only extant Shrovetide farce a more relevant, and illuminating, work than what critics have posited so far.

Later school plays reflect the moral transformation that followed. "The Reformation maintained the status quo of gender relations, and valued stability and order," writes Kirsi Stjerna, "The life of the home . . . was arranged according to the same patriarchal model that was at the root of the guild system."⁸⁰ No longer were devils the tempters, but women were. They became those who "alone carried the sin."⁸¹ In the late-1500s school play *Tobiæ Komædie*, a woman faces three suitors who represent not class but one deadly sin each. The final suitor is the most contemptible, a man known to have slept around. Representing lust, this libidinous character establishes himself as the favored villain in similar plays from this period.⁸² When a proper marriage is finally secured, modeled after the Holy Family, the mother warns her daughter: "Be wary of young apprentices."⁸³ Contemporaneously, the play *Calumniæ* warns against listening to whispering seducers.⁸⁴ With these Protestant school plays, "the moral tightening of the family structure was completed—at least literarily."⁸⁵

The Unfaithful Wife was on the winning side of this moral contestation.⁸⁶ It conveyed to its apprentice audiences that working hard to earn master craftsman status was their best bet for a better tomorrow, also in terms of mating; that is how the epilog ties a moral ribbon on such a crude play. Once this message is conveyed, the presenter turns to a different bodily desire. His second agenda is shared through the play's final lines: "Now it's time that we got out of here, / But not before we've had some beer!" (445–6).

Irregular Decline in Sexual Repression

If my interpretation is convincing, *The Unfaithful Wife* embodies the mating morality of the EMP. The play's pragmatism aligns with companionate love. Its innovation lied in promoting Church MFPs not by dramatizing an ideal bible world but through satirizing recognizable mating dynamics with impressive precision. Critics have not been attuned to these elements. Søndergaard concluded that "*The Unfaithful Wife* is far from being a moralizing play."⁸⁷ The ending's "(anti)moral is: if you have trouble getting a woman to bed, go to a cunning woman for help."⁸⁸ Through this purported encouragement of infidelity, the play "breaks with important aspects of the Church's worldview . . . thus representing a rebellion against religious norms."⁸⁹ Such

criticism represents a misguided approach to fiction. The fact that characters act immorally must not translate into a work's thematic argument condoning their behavior. The playwright takes a strong stand against clandestine mating through (1) connecting such mating to black magic in the witch sequence and (2) spelling out the significance of this in the epilog.

This ending makes the play not rebel against tradition but express a typically medieval worldview: yes, the social order is unfair, yet "there was no room for the thought that progress might change conditions of life, because the idea of progress and real development did not exist."⁹⁰ Mostly during the upside-down world of Shrovetide were grievances, like those of class and gender, worth entertaining.⁹¹ Conveying such morality through a crude play, one that appealed to marginalized men, would likely have been a more productive strategy than the proselytization of religious plays. Admittedly, subtly promoting the soundness of chastity to inebriated Shrovetide revelers would have made for unreliable uptake, but moral reception is a perpetual challenge for all storytellers.

The early modern retightening of public morality did not have an immediate impact on people's behavior. It took around a century for Europeans to internalize the new ethos.⁹² This too is a pattern we will see in the Romantic Century, how it takes decades, or generations, for a new mating ideology to permeate populations. With the seventeenth century's economic crisis and stagnation,⁹³ Puritan chastity served Europeans well. Libertine culture arose here and there, but did not influence the behavior of large population segments.⁹⁴ Toward the eighteenth century, writes Posner, there was a "gradual although irregular decline in sexual repression."⁹⁵ When the eighteenth century arrived, the EMP was again bursting at the seams. Young Europeans had had enough of companionate pragmatism. An increasing number of them wanted to make their own mating decisions. Wage labor, mobility, and an ever-more individualistic psychology facilitated the Second Sexual Revolution. Three decades before this momentous transformation, Ludvig Holberg began writing stage comedies that anticipated romantic love and individual choice, and a few of the social consequences that would transform mating over the next centuries. He made domestic servants—the largest group deprived of mating by the EMP—the heroes of his plays and a moral vanguard for the new era.

Notes

- 1 S. Birket Smith, ed., *De tre ældste danske skuespil* (Copenhagen: Det kongelige danske selskab for fædrelandets historie og sprog, 1874), 23.
- 2 John Hajnal separated between the northwestern EMP region and the southeastern non-EMP region by drawing a line across Europe, from St. Petersburg to Trieste, then west through Italy and Spain; Hajnal, "European Marriage Patterns in Perspective."

- 3 We cannot say with certainty what drove this century's promiscuity. Large cultural changes are too complex to distinguish precise causality. Low population numbers, available land, high wages, and the economic boom of the long sixteenth century (1450–1600) made possible looser MFPs than what had been the case after the mid-thirteenth-century end of the high medieval expansion; Secombe, *A Millennium of Family Change*; Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family*.
- 4 Posner, *Sex and Reason*, 16.
- 5 Norway's population size recovered from the Black Death in the early 1500s but then skyrocketed. By one estimate, the population tripled from 1520 to 1660; Hans Eyvind Næss, *Trolldomsprosessene i Norge på 1500–1600-tallet: En retts- og sosialhistorisk undersøkelse* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1982).
- 6 Bardsley, "Missing Women"; Clover, "The Politics of Scarcity"; Coleman, "Infanticide in the Early Middle Ages"; Siegfried, "The Skewed Sex Ratio in a Medieval Population"; Wicker, "Christianization, Female Infanticide."
- 7 I am not suggesting that the conscious motivation of actors in this struggle was to avoid a Malthusian crisis. Many would have thought no further than that promiscuity is against God's will. My evolutionary perspective makes me deemphasize individual agency and perspective, which are paramount to a humanist perspective. Environmental pressures influence cultural assumptions, which motivate individual behavior, irrespective of to what extent the actors themselves are aware of the pressures that influence them.
- 8 Secombe, *A Millennium of Family Change*; Ågren and Erickson, *The Marital Economy*.
- 9 Olav Solberg, "Jocular Ballads and Carnival Culture," in Bengt R. Jonsson, ed., *The Stockholm Ballad Conference 1991* (Stockholm: Svensk Visarkiv, 1993), 17–23.
- 10 Leif Søndergaard, *Fastelavnsspillet i Danmarks senmiddelalder: om Den utro hustru og fastelavnsspillet tradition* (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1989).
- 11 Graham Caie, "'Unfaithful Wives and Weeping Bitches': *Den utro hustru*," *European Medieval Drama* 2 (1998): 99–110, 108.
- 12 Didactic plays were situated in an unrelatable story world, informed by biblical ideals. Shrovetide plays caricatured townspeople's everyday life; Torben Krogh, "Teatret," in Julius Clausen and Torben Krogh, eds., *Danmark i fest og glæde*, I (Copenhagen: Chr. Erichsens forlag, 1935), 258.
- 13 Søndergaard, *Fastelavnsspillet*, 54.
- 14 The male desire for partner variety is sometimes referred to as the Coolidge Effect. David Buss tells the popular old joke of when "President Calvin Coolidge and his wife, Grace, were being given separate tours of newly formed government farms. Upon passing the chicken coops and noticing a rooster vigorously copulating with a hen, Mrs. Coolidge inquired about how often the rooster performed this duty. 'Dozens of times each day,' replied the guide. Mrs. Coolidge asked the guide to 'please mention this fact to the president.' When the president passed by later and was informed of the sexual vigor of the rooster, he asked, 'Always with the same hen?' 'Oh, no,' the guide replied, 'a different one each time.' 'Please tell that to Mrs. Coolidge,' said the president. And so, the 'Coolidge effect' was named—the male tendency to be sexually re-aroused upon the presentation of novel females, giving males an impulse to mate with multiple females. The Coolidge effect is a widespread mammalian trait that has been documented many times"; Buss, *The Evolution of Desire*.

- 15 Buss and Schmitt, "Sexual Strategies Theory."
- 16 David M. Buss, "Sexual Conflict in Human Mating," *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 26.4 (2017): 307–13. Partner violence can be understood from this perspective of intersex conflict; Mads Larsen, "Evolutionary Approaches to Domestic Violence," Todd Shackelford, ed., *Encyclopedia of Domestic Violence* (London: Springer Nature, 2023), 1–15.
- 17 Ågren and Erickson, *The Marital Economy*; De Moor and van Zanden, "Girl Power"; Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe*; Seccombe, *A Millennium of Family Change*.
- 18 Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.
- 19 Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*.
- 20 The fifteenth century's sexual laxness did not entail that short-term markets were entirely free, only relatively free compared to earlier and later markets. When a culture permits a higher level of promiscuity, such opportunities tend to befall a minority of men, but who this male sexual elite consists of depends on the environment. In the Conclusion chapter, I elaborate on how vast the difference is between the winners on today's short-term markets compared to those of antiquity.
- 21 Søndergaard, *Fastelavnsspillet*, 56.
- 22 Ida Blom and Sølvi Sogner, ed., *Med kjønnsperspektiv på norsk historie: Fra vikingtid til 2000-årsskiftet* (Oslo: Cappelen Akademisk forlag, 1999), 45.
- 23 Seccombe, *A Millennium of Family Change*. A characteristic of the EMP was the high number of women who never married: 10–20% in Northwestern Europe in the period 1300–1700. In Southern Europe, this proportion was 2–5%. Northwestern Europe had more single adults than any other region in the world. In the 1500s, a third to half of the adult population were not married, partly due to the EMP's late marriage age; Coontz, *Marriage, a History*, 127. Many men turned to prostitutes. Contemporary tax numbers from Bergen show that around 5% of the town's population were sex workers; Blom and Sogner, *Med kjønnsperspektiv på norsk historie*, 50.
- 24 Smith, *De tre ældste danske skuespil*.
- 25 Smith, *De tre ældste danske skuespil*, 24.
- 26 S. Birket Smith, *Studier på de gamle danske skuespils område* (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske boghandels forlag, 1883), 59.
- 27 Smith, *De tre ældste danske skuespil*, 19–20.
- 28 Krogh, "Teatret," 254.
- 29 N. M. Petersen, *Bidrag til den danske literaturs historie*, 2 (Copenhagen: Den danske historiske forening, 1854), 306.
- 30 Kimberly La Palm, "Uncovering Performance in Medieval Scandinavia: A Survey and Analysis of Medieval Performance in Scandinavia," dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles, 2016, 28.
- 31 Hans Brix, *Analyser og problemer 6* (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske boghandel nordisk forlag, 1950), 107.
- 32 Brix, *Analyser og problemer 6*, 116.
- 33 Marvin Carlson, "Renaissance Theatre in Scandinavia," *Theater Survey* 14 (1973): 22–54, 28.
- 34 Søndergaard, *Fastelavnsspillet*, 70.
- 35 Caie, "Unfaithful Wives," 102.
- 36 Larry Søndergaard, "Fastelavnsspillet i Danmarks senmiddelalder: om *Den utro hustru* og fastelavnsspillet tradition by Leif Søndergaard," *Comparative Drama* 26 (1992): 183–88, 187.
- 37 La Palm, "Uncovering Performance," 77, 80.

- 38 Søndergaard, "Fastelavnsspillet," 186.
- 39 Seccombe, *A Millennium of Family Change*; Ågren and Erickson, *The Marital Economy*; Allyson M. Poska et al., eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2013); David de la Croix and Fabio Mariani, "Polygyny to Serial Monogamy: A Unified Theory of Marriage Institutions," *The Review of Economic Studies* 82 (2015): 565–607.
- 40 Søndergaard, *Fastelavnsspillet*, 35, 58; Smith, *De tre ældste danske skuespil*, 14.
- 41 Carlson, "Renaissance Theatre in Scandinavia," 23.
- 42 The Shrovetide farce tradition was predominantly from Nuremburg, whose craftsmen imbued their plays with a generous serving of infidelity. The rich merchants of Lubeck preferred their fictional females to remain faithful; Søndergaard, *Fastelavnsspillet*, 27. There are around 150 extant German Shrovetide farces, most of them from Nuremburg; La Palm, "Uncovering Performance," 72.
- 43 A 1447 letter from the prior of St. Hans Cloister in Odense seems to support that Shrovetide plays were an established tradition. The earliest German scripts are from the 1430s; La Palm, "Uncovering Performance," 84.
- 44 Søndergaard, *Fastelavnsspillet*, 22; La Palm, "Uncovering Performance," 85–86; Bente Lavold, "Innledning," in Bente Lavold and John Ødemark, eds., *Reformasjonstidens religiøse bokkultur cirka 1400–1700: tekst, visualitet og materialitet* (Oslo: Nasjonalbiblioteket, 2017), 10–18, 12.
- 45 For an earlier version of this interpretation, see Mads Larsen, "Staging the Market Mechanisms of Medieval Mating in *Den utro hustru*," *Comparative Drama* 56.3 (2022): 283–312.
- 46 Caie, "Unfaithful Wives," 107.
- 47 The English translation is from *The Unfaithful Wife*. For modern Danish, see *Den utro hustru*. For original Danish, see [*Den utro hustru*]. Number range refers to lines.
- 48 Søndergaard, *Fastelavnsspillet*, 32.
- 49 Brix, *Analyser og problemer* 6, 112.
- 50 Søndergaard, *Fastelavnsspillet*, 38.
- 51 This would be high-stakes drama for sex-starved apprentices. Many harbored ambitions of both short- and long-term mating with their bosses' wives. The sexual and romantic tension between apprentices and master craftsmen's wives served a practical function in this era of high mortality. If widowed, the wife would typically have three years to marry someone who could take over the shop. Such a promotion, to gain both a wife and a functioning shop, was of considerable value—even if the woman was older. There might not even be an age difference, as widowed craftsmen typically took younger wives. Søndergaard believes these mating dynamics contributed to a particular interest in urban guilds for sex and cheating.
- 52 Daniel Conroy-Beam et al., "Assortative Mating and the Evolution of Desirability Covariation," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 40.5 (2019): 479–91; Daniel Conroy-Beam et al., "Contrasting Computational Models of Mate Preference Integration Across 45 Countries," *Scientific Reports* 9.1 (2019): 16885.
- 53 Tamas Bereczkei et al., "Resources, Attractiveness, Family Commitment: Reproductive Decisions in Human Mate Choice," *Ethology* 103 (1997): 681–99; Buss and Schmitt, "Evolutionary Psychology and Feminism."
- 54 Other common motivations for female infidelity are to acquire additional resources and to provide offspring with better genes or genetic variability; Fisher, *Anatomy of Love*; Buss and Schmitt, "Mate Preferences and Their Behavioral Manifestations."

- 55 Buss, *When Men Behave Badly*.
- 56 Brix, *Analyser og problemer* 6, 112.
- 57 Søndergaard, *Fastelavnsspillet*, 74.
- 58 Stephanie M. Carlson et al., “Theory of Mind,” *WIREs Cognitive Science* 4.4 (2013): 391–402.
- 59 Henrich, *The WEIRD People in the World*.
- 60 Joseph Carroll, “Evolutionary Social Theory: The Current State of Knowledge,” *Style* 49 (2015): 512–41, 535.
- 61 Caie, “Unfaithful Wives,” 103.
- 62 Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968), 21.
- 63 La Palm, “Uncovering Performance,” 76.
- 64 Søndergaard, *Fastelavnsspillet*, 76.
- 65 *Spil om en doktor*, in Leif Søndergaard, ed. and trans. *Middelalderspil i moderne fordansking* (Odense: Center for Middelalderstudier, Syddansk Universitet, 2003), 43–57, 52.
- 66 Søndergaard, *Fastelavnsspillet*, 33.
- 67 Søndergaard, *Fastelavnsspillet*, 76.
- 68 Brix, *Analyser og problemer* 6, 112.
- 69 Since Our Lady and other such schools were all-male, also the female parts were played by late-teen boys. My guess would be that the wife character would appear increasingly promiscuous as students became more inebriated after each guild performance.
- 70 Buss and Schmitt, “Mate Preferences,” 91.
- 71 Søndergaard, *Fastelavnsspillet*, 70.
- 72 Carter et al., “The Dark Triad Personality.”
- 73 Håkon Haugland, “Felleskap og brorskap: En komparativ undersøkelse av gildenes sosiale, religiøse og rettslige rolle i et utvalg nordiske byer fra midten av 1200-tallet til reformasjonen,” dissertation, University of Bergen, 2012, 354.
- 74 Nora Parren, “The (Possible) Cognitive Naturalness of Witchcraft Beliefs: An Exploration of the Existing Literature,” *Journal of Cognition and Culture* 17 (2017): 396–418; Niek Koning, “Witchcraft Beliefs and Witch Hunts: An Interdisciplinary Explanation,” *Human Nature* 24 (2013): 158–81.
- 75 Søndergaard, *Fastelavnsspillet*, 28.
- 76 Brix, *Analyser og problemer* 6, 109.
- 77 Caie, “Unfaithful Wives,” 107.
- 78 Søndergaard, *Fastelavnsspillet*, 72.
- 79 After the post-Plague era’s labor shortage and generous salaries, the sixteenth century’s labor surplus drove a “sharp decline in real wages,” further pushing up the marriage age; De Moor and van Zanden, “Girl Power,” 28.
- 80 Kirsi Stjerna, *Women and the Reformation* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2009), 215.
- 81 Søndergaard, *Fastelavnsspillet*, 73.
- 82 Hans Brix, *Analyser og problemer* 5 (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske boghandel nordisk forlag, 1940), 125.
- 83 S. Birket Smith, ed., *Tobix Komædie: Et dansk skuespil fra tiden omkring 1600* (Copenhagen: Univesitets-jubilæets danske samfund, 1887), 82.
- 84 S. Birket Smith, ed., *Peder Hegelund’s Susanna og Calumnia* (Copenhagen: Univesitets-jubilæets danske samfund, 1888–90).
- 85 Søndergaard, *Fastelavnsspillet*, 59.
- 86 Its morality might have contributed to why *The Unfaithful Wife* is Scandinavia’s only extant Shrovetide farce. After festive Shrovetide celebrations were

delegitimized in the 1520s, a priest may have hidden away a handwritten collection of Our Lady's repertoire, believes Søndergaard. Perhaps preserved by the same aristocratic milieu that collected ballads, the script did not appear in records until an estate auction in 1739. During this period, the puritan mood had motivated someone to censor the crudest words, for instance, by crossing out "dick" and writing "louse." Søndergaard interprets the manuscript's wear and tear to support that it "was eagerly used, meaning that it was played several times" in the years around 1530. The transcript was made part of a collection with other plays between 1531 and 1536, the year of Denmark's conversion to Protestantism. In light of the authorities' cracking down on Shrovetide festivities in the 1520s, Søndergaard's hypothesis warrants caution.

87 Søndergaard, *Fastelavnsspillet*, 36.

88 Søndergaard, *Middelalderspil*, 8.

89 Søndergaard, *Fastelavnsspillet*, 63.

90 Solberg, "Jocular Ballads," 20.

91 Humphrey, *The World Upside-Down*; Solberg, "Jocular Ballads."

92 Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family*, 82.

93 Secombe, *A Millennium of Family Change*.

94 James Grantham Turner, *Libertines and Radicals in Early Modern London: Sexuality, Politics and Literary Culture, 1630–1685* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

95 Posner, *Sex and Reason*, 16.

4 Promoting Romantic Love Individual Choice in Holberg's Comedies (1722–1754)

Romantic love is an ideology of individual choice, of wanting to copulate and pair-bond based on one's individual desires. Modern Westerners may take such a regime for granted, but our ancestors generally did not get to pick their own mates. In past societies, at least those we know of, arranged marriages were the norm.¹ Around 1750, the Second Sexual Revolution opened up unchartered mating territory for *Homo sapiens*. We are still dealing with the consequences, and we are yet to unite around norms and values that facilitate a stable mating regime. This revolution's unrivaled empowering of the individual set in motion the cultural evolution that underpins today's plummeting fertility rates. A generation before this revolution, Scandinavia's preeminent Enlightenment figure promoted romantic love but also predicted externalities similar to those we struggle with today.

Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754) had an exceptional ability to step out of his own culture. This ornery, intellectual loner lived his life at a social and psychological distance from other people that helped him see the relativism of what others experienced as truth.² In this chapter, I argue that he was among the most heterodox and prescient European thinkers of the eighteenth century. Until recently, scholars were mostly oblivious to this aspect of one of Scandinavia's most beloved playwrights and influential academics. The consensus has mostly been that Holberg was an unoriginal thinker and a playwright who followed conventions to entertain.³ My evolutionary approach to Holberg's stage comedies allows me to make a case for how two centuries of criticism have overlooked fundamental aspects of his comedic oeuvre. His plays embody an understanding of the evolution of mating ideologies that, with twenty-first-century hindsight, appears remarkably astute. If my interpretation is convincing, it is imperative that we revalue Holberg's imaginative character as a playwright and his originality as a thinker.

With my novel approach, I hope to further the reappraisal of Holberg that has marked the past decades. After the Third Sexual Revolution of the

1960s, critics finally became attuned to how Holberg, arguably, had been Scandinavia's first feminist.⁴ His decades-long campaign for educational and professional equality for women put Holberg "ahead of the entire Enlightenment Hall of Fame."⁵ A quarter of a millennium after gender equality appeared obviously preferable to Holberg, Scandinavian populations internalized the same position.

In the past decade, scholars have discovered another exceptional aspect of Holbergian thought: how dramatically he broke with his era's Eurocentric universality.⁶ The West's psychological-institutional coevolution had driven people toward ever more abstract thinking, which expressed itself in a quest for universal truths and rights.⁷ Through scholarly and fictional works, Holberg warned against the consequences of such narcissism. His insights align with "the new cosmopolitanism and transnationalism as they have re-emerged over the last twenty years."⁸

In previous studies, I have shown how Holberg imbued Scandinavia's first novel, *Niels Klim's Underground Travels* (1741), with historicist cosmopolitanism, a relativist stance which opposes Eurocentric universality.⁹ His philosophical novel warns against how Enlightenment thought could underpin colonial practices of the sort that would come to mark the centuries ahead. Western exceptionalism culminated with the post-1989 end-of-history hubris.¹⁰ Only after this ideology had crashed into the realities of the twenty-first century did scholars become attuned to what Holberg had warned against. His prescience and insights justify placing Holberg alongside Giambattista Vico, another ornery loner whose proto-historicist *New Science* (1725) made him one of the eighteenth century's most original thinkers.¹¹

In this chapter, I argue that Holberg's prescience was similarly impressive with regard to mating. His plays center on what I consider to be his epoch's most fateful transition, that from companionate to romantic love. The pivotal eighteenth century—the entry point into modernity—is mostly approached from a political-philosophical perspective. To understand the consequences of the Enlightenment, we must realize how its concern with individual rights is intricately tied to copulation and pair-bonding. The modern West's transition from a regime predominantly of arranged marriages to one of individual choice was unique. Under no previous social order were young people to such an extent able to wrest power over mate choice away from their family and kin.¹² This empowerment of the individual gained momentum with the Second Sexual Revolution, but as we will see over the next chapters, environmental conditions could not support psychological expectations. Only with post-World War II prosperity and the contraceptive pill could Westerners afford to fully realize the promises inherent in the revolution supported by Holberg's plays.

Scandinavia's one-man Enlightenment show was not the first thinker or storyteller to support individual mate choice. This has been a central question through humanity's forager and agricultural phases. Fiction has always asked what the right balance is between individual and parental choice. Literary theorist Northrop Frye wrote that the conflict between the "Society of Young" and "Society of Old" defined the comedy format we inherited from ancient Greece.¹³ Holberg's renewal lay in making his "Society of Young" embody the early-1700s rebellion against the companionate ideology which upheld the EMP. He identified a moral change among young wage earners that he thought would undermine the power that the "Society of Old" wielded in matters of mating. Holberg envisioned how such a revolution would transform society, including the perils this entailed. He thought individual choice would drive an increasing reliance on market logic—the mode of reasoning that at the time was gaining influence—also with regard to copulation and pair-bonding. He predicted an evolution toward a mating morality evocative of confluent love. With gender equality, men and women would no longer seek complementarity but compatibility. Affluent men to an increasing extent marrying affluent women, Holberg feared, would contribute to rising economic inequalities, such as those we experience today, which would further a process of marginalization that disincentivizes reproduction.

These insights, I argue, fueled Holberg's impetus to write his first more than two dozen plays in three years. Critics have assumed that he was driven mostly to entertain. A common accusation has been that his plays lack "contemporary relevance."¹⁴ Situating his work at the tail end of the EMP reveals Holberg's deep social engagement. The comedies dramatize other timely conflicts as well, but gender and mating seem more relevant to Holberg than to any other prominent thinker of his era. From this perspective, it is unfortunate that his modern standard biographer concluded that Holberg only reluctantly wrote of mating:

Holberg followed ancient conventions loyally, which dictated that these are the comedy's regular themes. It is obvious that he would rather do without these outdated tropes, and that he fills them with fully conventional content, without any noticeable new dimension based on his own experience.¹⁵

In the following, I argue the opposite. Holberg renews the ancient comedy format.¹⁶ He is strongly driven to engage his era's problematics of mating, which he does by embodying his works with the ethos of the Second Sexual Revolution. He seems able to do this precisely because of "his own experience"—one of nonparticipation. Holberg appears to have been a lifelong celibate, perhaps due to a testicular condition which causes

infertility and reduced libido.¹⁷ His distance from the mating games people play probably helped him realize the relativity of the ideology which informs these games, as well as how a changed environment would necessitate a novel ideology. Holberg identified several of the individual and social mechanisms that seem to inform why the West is now headed for a demographic collapse.

Women and Proletarians

In the early 1720s, when Holberg was asked to write for Denmark's first professional theater with performances in the vernacular, he had already taken a strong position on the topic his compatriots would need another century and a half to take seriously: *the woman question*. Jonathan Israel found only one contemporary thinker of prominence who was able to abstract gender to the extent that Holberg did.¹⁸ François Poulain de la Barre took Descartes' dualism so seriously that he wrote two treatises arguing that gender differences did not affect processes within the Cartesian container, that is, our brains.¹⁹ Confusingly, he followed up with a third treatise that argued the opposite.²⁰

Holberg did not waver. His support of female equality was a returning thread through his literary and scholarly production. In his 1716 monograph on natural law,²¹ in the epic poem *Peder Paars* (1720),²² and in the humorous poem "Zille Hans Dotter's Defense of Womankind" (1722),²³ Holberg argues that women should have equal educational and professional opportunity. In one of his first plays, *Jean de France* (1722),²⁴ the servant Marthe warns a male chauvinist of the upcoming revolutions of gender and class: "The time will come when society will consider brains more important than sex and ability greater than name" (74).²⁵

Contemporary readers and critics ignored Holberg's vision for the future of men and women. They seem to have assumed that he was joking.²⁶ Nineteenth-century critics maintained this position.²⁷ C. W. Smith took Holberg seriously but suggested that the polymath's unconventional views on women resulted from him never having been married to one.²⁸ Georg Brandes, the nineteenth century's premier Scandinavian critic, was the first to recognize Holberg's intellectual achievement:

With an eye for the human, not for the womanly in the woman, Holberg has, as a result of his brilliance, anticipated and advocated the largest and most fateful social revolution that the remote future carried within it.²⁹

Leading critics continued to underplay Holberg's gender prescience.³⁰ After the Third Sexual Revolution, scholars became eager to align Holberg's

writings with social democratic gender equality.³¹ We see the same pattern as with *The Unfaithful Wife* in the previous chapter. Most critics are so blinded by their era's mating ideology that they struggle to take seriously positions that go against their own. Once Scandinavia had become the world's most gender-equal region, some scholars praised Holberg as the first Nordic feminist.³²

But what was Holberg's agenda; why did he obsess over gender and mating? Anne Jensen believes Holberg, like Poulain de la Barre, had his feminism inspired by Descartes, but finds no evidence to support her position.³³ Thomas Bredsdorff is not convinced by Jensen or those who seek a biological explanation in Holberg's possible cryptorchidism, a testicular condition that complicates mating.³⁴ Holberg would perhaps have found Bredsdorff to be overstating his case when concluding that "the ability and imagination to imagine a world in which women have other rights are located between the ears, not between the legs."³⁵ Holberg conceptualized biology as interacting with the environment in a manner that made questions of nature versus nurture more complex than what was appreciated by contemporary universalists. His imagination may not have been driven by what was between his legs, but people's gender, class, and other characteristics affect their thinking. If Holberg suffered a condition that made copulation and pair-bonding less attractive, his nonparticipation may have helped him see mating dynamics more clearly.

Such biocultural thinking made Holberg a relativist who nonetheless grounded his case for gender—and also racial—equality in humanity's shared nature.³⁶ He viewed "fashions and conventions as secondary constructs, in the face of which 'nature' is claimed to be a more stable base."³⁷ Brandes and Bredsdorff both emphasize that Holberg's primary concern was not female empowerment but to improve human relations.³⁸ In his monograph on heroes of history, Holberg spells out that "my purpose is not to encourage women to demand any rights, but to exhort men not to talk too grandiosely of their own greatness and to ground this in nature."³⁹ For him, gender equality was a question of efficacy, informed not by a framework of abstract rights but by what benefits society. Such a utilitarian stance, I argue, also informs his criticism of eighteenth-century mating. His plays offer generous room for the proponents of companionate love to present their best case. Those who support romantic love win the thematic argument not because their ideology is true but because it better fits their environment.

The conflict Holberg dramatizes is perennial, but his answers are anchored in time and place. The period 1500–1700 had entailed "the disintegration of the peasantry as a social class," while 1700–1900 heralded "the rise of capitalism . . . with the formation of the proletariat."⁴⁰ Holberg's life straddled this transition. Companionate love had fit the peasant reality, one of

resource precarity and strong familial bonds. Romantic love appealed to the growing proletariat, an uprooted class with personal salaries and individualistic ambitions. At this time, around half of Scandinavians worked as servants in their youth. Similar numbers marked Northwestern Europe.⁴¹ Women being away from family and earning their own money “gave rise to a veritable sexual revolution among young working-class women between 1750 and 1850.”⁴² It might sound unromantic, but the Romantic Century was undergirded by cash. These “new proletarians of the eighteenth century were the vanguard of the sexual revolution because they were the first to be caught up in the market economy.”⁴³

In Holberg’s comedies, this class embodies his progressive mating morality. Domestic servants—often named Henrich and Pernille—execute intrigues that disempower the older generations who uphold the ideals of companionate love. The plays often end with young people being allowed to marry whom their hearts desire or—if they prefer—someone who lets them elevate their socioeconomic standing. Holbergian love thus entails a rational approach to pair-bonding, but one that accommodates the irrational potential of human emotions, which can be strong when young people are driven to copulate and pair-bond. In *The Fidget* (*Den Stundesløse*, 1731), Holberg has a character express that “love is such a strong passion that one transgresses all boundaries to enjoy what one sincerely desires” (III,5).⁴⁴ In *Masquerades* (*Mascarade*, 1724), young Leonora condemns her “new love, but I can’t prevent it” (185).⁴⁵ In the premodern world, suppressing such desires may have been adaptive. In the modern West, Holberg predicted that we could better afford to accommodate the emotions that he himself never got to experience.⁴⁶

Individual vs. Parental Choice

When he wrote of his own life-long bachelorhood, Holberg offered the EMP as an excuse. In several writings, he quips that when he was suitable for marriage, he could not afford a wife, and when he finally could, he was no longer suited. “I used to fear poverty,” he writes, “now I fear horns.”⁴⁷ Scholars have not found this explanation fully convincing, as Holberg was still only 33 years old when he earned a well-paid professorship.⁴⁸ The horns he mentions, a symbol for being cuckolded, show up in several plays. For women, a way to surpass the demands for resource accumulation was to marry an older man of means. To a lesser extent, young men married widows for similar reasons.⁴⁹ Holberg lets the servant class argue against such pragmatism.⁵⁰

In *Pernille’s Brief Experience as a Lady* (*Pernilles korte Froiken-Stand*, 1727), Pernille refuses to support a marriage motivated by money: “I’d wring her neck before I let her marry that old scoundrel.” She insists that

such a union would lead to “unhappiness and destruction,” even comparing it to murder. Holberg’s plays portray such old man–young woman pairings to be against nature, a way for those of means to oppress those without. Pernille makes it imperative to cheat on these men: a woman trapped in a union of this kind “was very poorly raised if she didn’t make him a cuckold. Yes, I’d say for my part that I’d never speak to her if she didn’t do it” (285–7).⁵¹ Marital infidelity is thus offered as a means for subversive politics, a revenge that the impoverished young should inflict upon those who drew them into a companionate pair-bond.

Holberg lets the parent generation counter Pernille’s romantic universalism:

You love-sick girls only pay attention to youth and handsome faces, and you think that your joy comes from that; but when the first heat is over, we begin, but all too late, to lament our folly, so the intense love changes to hate and disagreement in marriage. On the other hand, if you marry to become affluent, love will surely grow more and more, until finally even that man who seemed ugly in the beginning will catch your eye every time you consider the affluence he has brought you.

(295)

In *Jacob von Tyboe* (1723), we get a sense of how such pragmatism is informed by the former generation’s experiences with living in an environment of intermittent catastrophe. Young people in love may be “happy in the beginning, but as soon as poverty and want enter the household, love is transformed into hatred and blame.” Environmental pressures are portrayed to affect mating cognition, as “he whom we previous could not look at without disgust will shine in our eyes as an Adonis every time we consider the affluence with which he has provided us” (III,3).

Holberg emphasizes the importance of context. Companionate love was not an ideology someone clever had conceived of and imposed on the young. It arose as a cultural response to an environment in which farmers struggled to reproduce their numbers. Viewing marriage primarily as a means for provision could secure your lineage’s survival. Only in the 1770s—with economic growth, increasing promiscuity, declining mortality, and the waning of epidemics—would Scandinavia’s lower classes overtake the rich in terms of reproduction.⁵² In this new context, people could afford to place greater emphasis on emotion when choosing mates. Holberg, the incurable skeptic, did not buy into the transcendent aspirations that would mark the nineteenth-century version of romantic love.⁵³ He did not think that human emotions offered truth but that self-determination and gender equality could lead to somewhat more successful pair-bonds. He hoped for a future in which fewer had to marry

for money or remain single. A first step toward such a future was to leave courting to the young instead of having parents abuse the custom of double consent.

In *Jean de France*, a father insists that marriage is “not for the sake of the individual, but for the family” (76). Parental coercion was the linchpin of the EMP—and Holberg’s dramatic fuel. In *Erasmus Montanus* (1723), a father expresses, “My wife and I are decent, God-fearing people who would sooner wring our daughter’s neck than give her to a man who says that the world is round and brings false doctrine to this town” (178).⁵⁴ Holberg aligns their position with irrationality by grounding parental refusal in flat-earth beliefs. Yet he also sympathizes with parental concern. Arranged marriages may feel immoral to us modern Westerners, but there were adaptive reasons for why families had always—although to various extents—imposed their will on the young. In the premodern world, choosing the right mate could be of existential importance. Marriages can have complex stakes, and teenage emotions are not optimized for making reasoned, holistic decisions. Holberg was not blind to the risks of individual choice but skeptical of parental wisdom. In *Jean de France*, he has Marthe warn against what evolutionary psychologists refer to as the “parent-offspring conflict over mating,”⁵⁵ that is, how parents are incentivized to select mates that can benefit in-laws:

I don’t believe you should align yourself with the whims of your parents. They arrange marriages only for their own interests, so they can align themselves with families who can advance them, so they often sacrifice their children’s welfare for such arrangements. Young people, on the other hand, don’t think about such things, but choose a partner for a spouse whom they wish to live with in happiness, and they love just for love’s sake.

(73)

Under the companionate regime, parents who were well-off had more influence over mate choice because they had resources on which their offspring relied. For the poorest youth, the EMP pushed up their marriage age, but marrying “for love [was] the dubious privilege of those without property.”⁵⁶ Holberg compared these courtship regimes, concluding that the companionate approach was ineffective compared to how “a peasant lad falls in love with a girl today and puts her in the bridal bed tomorrow. Marriage of distinguished folk, on the other hand, does not take place without previous unnecessary formalities and preparations.”⁵⁷ In *Masquerades*, Holberg uses Henrich as his mouthpiece: “When one gets engaged oneself without the parents as agents; then one can have the engagement, the wedding, and the preparations for the christening all at once” (174). The marriage-ready

burgher daughter in *The Political Tinker* (*Den Politiske Kandstøber*, 1722) exemplifies how such individualistic thinking was gaining influence: “I will not be a Young Lady . . . I’d rather be a peasant’s daughter, then I’d be sure to get the man to whom I’ve already given my heart” (31).⁵⁸

Holberg sided with romantic love but did not encourage rebellion, similar to the way in which he did not encourage women to demand rights. “A child commits a reprehensible deed when marrying someone the parents do not find suitable,” he writes in his work on natural law, “since it is of the greatest importance for a father that no son-in-law or daughter-in-law is imposed on him against his will.” As he aged, Holberg’s evolving understanding of natural law more strongly supported romantic love. He concludes his chapter on the duties of parents and children: “A child can reverently refuse to bind themselves to a spouse to whom their heart does not agree, since the bond of marriage should be mutual love, and it is difficult to love based on command.”⁵⁹ In his fictional works, Holberg tried to influence audiences through staging the benefits of letting individuals play out their mate preferences on open markets. The prosperous should learn from peasant courtship, in which

it all happens in an orderly and natural fashion. Each of the lovers is without mask; they settle on the price themselves, and the agreement is made without plenipotentiaries; for which reason, such marriages have better outcomes than those made with artfulness.⁶⁰

Market logic is here applied to mating. The man and woman know better themselves what they value—how aspects of their relationship should be priced—so they should make their own pair-bonding decisions. Such thinking would drive an increasing emphasis on the individual good rather than the good of kin or community, or even marriage itself. Holberg anticipated how such a regime would bring new challenges.

Gender Equality and Serial Pair-Bonding

In *The Political Tinker*, an unsympathetic man speculates on how, in their emerging world of greater commercialization, men could use market logic also to force wives into social submission. Instead of lifelong monogamy, he wants marriage contracts “for a specific number of years, so when a man isn’t happy with his wife, he can make a new contract with another one.” Such a regime would ensure that “there wouldn’t be one shrewish wife . . . instead each would do her best to pay lip service to her husband to have the contract renewed.” His proposal embodies a proto-confluent love, one without gender equality. Another character suggests that more open mating markets could also empower women. A temporary contract

would let women “be separated from a husband who was either cruel to her or a deadbeat who only ate and drank and refused to work to support his wife and children.” The men ponder that, with more open marriages, perhaps both husband and wife could also “get a little something on the side” (17–8).

With this exchange, Holberg outlines precisely what *Homo sapiens* evolved for: serial pair-bonding interspersed with opportunistic, short-term relationships.⁶¹ Agriculture had incentivized lifelong pair-bonds, but as this phase was nearing its end for Westerners, thinkers and artists like Holberg began exploring which novel mating regime might align better with human nature. Protestantism had already made divorce legal, but social sanctions ensured that it remained rare: through the early modern period, Norwegian records show fewer than a dozen divorces a year.⁶² After the sexually permissive fifteenth century, Protestantism had cracked down also on “a little something on the side,” but Holberg stages how our evolved nature seeks outlet when culture conspires against our impulses.

In *Jeppe of the Hill* (*Jeppe paa Bierget*, 1722), the protagonist is cuckolded by his wife, who sleeps with a high-status man, a deacon. The narrative conveys a comically pragmatic attitude toward such and other transgressions. Holberg’s most famous work entails a return to the sexual subversiveness of Shrovetide plays such as *The Unfaithful Wife*. Interestingly, in both the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, the popularity of farce comedies with grotesque realism coincided with the EMP’s weakened ability to inspire chastity. Holberg’s comedies reflect how early modern Puritanism had become less convincing. In the early 1700s, mating culture transformed. The number of women who took men to court for not agreeing to marriage after sex skyrocketed. Part of the double-consent doctrine had been to view sex as a *de facto* marriage contract. In 1734, the Danish-Norwegian government put an end to these lawsuits by establishing that men no longer owed marriage to seduced women. In 1783, both parties were free to pull out of betrothal, a formal premarital agreement that in 1799 was discarded altogether.⁶³ Individual rights increasingly trumped the cultural mechanisms that had connected sex and reproduction to pair-bonding.

Holberg’s comedies convey how this radically new environment requires novel morality. In *Jean de France*, Marthe sums up: “The old prophets are dead, and the new ones don’t work” (72). Instead of putting on a prophet cloak, Holberg encourages flexibility. In *Jeppe of the Hill*, he lets Nille—Jeppe’s violent, cuckolding wife—convey the importance of doing what works. The parson tells her, “You’re too hard on your husband, after all, he is and should be master of the house.” She answers, “If I let my husband rule this house for just one year, neither the baron would get his rent nor the parson his offerings, for in that time he’d drink up everything in the house.” The overseer accepts this reversal of gender roles, as “it does say in

the ritual that you should honor and obey your husband; but on the other hand, it's written in your lease, which is more current than your vows, that you must keep up your farm and pay your rent" (110).

Holberg offers a similar argument in *Henrick and Pernille* (*Henrick og Pernille*, 1724).⁶⁴ When capable wives are forced to submit to incapable husbands, they should promise "submissiveness in the marriage contract on day 1, do some adjustments in the contract on day 2, disregard it on day 3, be involved in decisions on day 4, and sit alone at the helm before the week is over" (I,3). If little but market logic remains to inform our decisions, gender roles must be negotiated by each couple, and pair-bonds will only last for as long as they are practical. This is a step beyond the romantic love that would prescribe lifelong marriage and distinct roles to each sex. Several of Holberg's plays support a development toward gender-equal, confluent love. *Jeppe of the Hill* makes a case for the superiority of what we today take for granted: the ability to end dysfunctional relationships. The play's most iconic line is: "People in the county are quick to say Jeppe drinks, but they never ask why Jeppe drinks" (111). Although "why does Jeppe drink?" has become a Nordic cultural enigma, I propose that him being trapped in a dysfunctional pair-bond is the most immediate reason for his alcoholism. How the play ends can be read to excuse both his drinking and Nille's extrapair copulation, as none of these transgressions are punished. The couple's domestic dread appears unsolvable without a new ideology of love.

Holberg supports such a moral evolution but also envisions how an ever-more individualistic mating regime could harm communities. He lets Pernille convey his concern for the cementation and furthering of class inequities. His eye for such dynamics stemmed from how he considered it his nature to take the side of the weakest, supporting the "conquered and oppressed," as this was nobler.⁶⁵ Holberg warns against how, when both husbands and wives earn incomes, the homophilic mating of the affluent would make it even harder for the poor to better their station through marriage. Pernille says, "It is nature's will that the one shall make up for the other, in order to hold the world together." From a regime of well-off men marrying well-off women, "it follows that we poor girls can't find happiness by marrying, and that we hold out for so long that we become sorry for ourselves and, out of desperation, finally become wet nurses."⁶⁶ Holberg warns against creating a society so stratified that the young are driven toward precarious labor instead of reproduction, which evokes what we see in our present era of decreasing fertility and an increasingly high marriage age.⁶⁷ Today's wet nurses are those who, instead of starting families, do gig work to support the households of the well-off—a development particularly visible in the United States. Modern technology even lets the prosperous hire others to bear their child.⁶⁸

Domestic Servants as a Moral Vanguard

I have shown how through these stage comedies, Holberg imagines an evolution from companionate love to a romantic regime of individual choice, which further evolves toward gender-equal mating with serial pair-bonding and, sometimes, “a little something on the side.” He identifies individual and social mechanisms that could drive dysfunctional mating: his plays express concern for what the long-term consequences could be of overly individualistic thinking, pair-bonds that drive economic inequality, and an increasing application of market logic to matters of mating. I find Holberg’s prescience eerie.⁶⁹ Naturally, I could be biased; I am interpreting his oeuvre in the twenty-first century as a scholar who specializes on the history of mating. Perhaps my enthusiasm for Holberg’s works makes me too eager to proselytize his prescience. Future scholars will have to decide if I have pushed my case too far. With regard to earlier scholarship, I am confident that I at least have illuminated aspects of Holberg’s comedic oeuvre that has been overlooked, and, more importantly for this study, I have shown how Holberg’s works offer insights into the stakes and conflicts of the Second Sexual Revolution.

Situating Holberg’s comedies in the decades prior to the modern West’s most fateful transition substantiates, in particular, his social engagement. I hope my interpretations have also been convincing with regard to his understanding of male–female relations. It has long been a trope in Holberg scholarship to bemoan his nonerotic writing. Critics have often assumed that this style choice resulted from a lack of insight. They have portrayed Holberg’s dispassionate distance to feelings of lust and love to be his great weakness as a dramatist.⁷⁰ Brandes is the exception. He points to how “Holberg’s deepest being was reason. From it, his force of imagination sprang. His restorative imagination was understanding.” If Holberg had bought into a particular mating morality and let his plays uncritically be informed by this, they would not have withstood the test of time. Instead, turning deep understanding into revelatory comedy has let his dramatic oeuvre “draw power from the years like wine.”⁷¹

Holberg’s modern standard biographer is right in that Holberg builds on ancient comedy conventions. Yet he only follows them loyally in the sense that all fictional formats with social ambition require renewal as times change. Mogens Leisner-Jensen’s position aligns with mine. He writes that “slaves in Roman comedies were as different from Holberg’s Henrich as night and day.”⁷² Holberg’s servants are not only social “quasi-equals” but endowed with tomorrow’s morality. An example of this is when Pernille proclaims, “I wish you were the town judge, Henrich.”⁷³ The insights of their generation may not yet inform the law of the land, but they soon will seem to be the attitude of the young wage earners. Leisner-Jensen

is less attuned to the ramifications of what these servants embody. He refers to how, in contemporary French comedies, the servant class grew politically subversive, while Holberg “has no rebellious servants [and thus] has not followed the French comedy’s evolution toward contemporary relevance.”⁷⁴ The exceptions he finds are when Henrich refers to the poverty under which he grew up.⁷⁵ Leisner-Jensen seems too accustomed to viewing the eighteenth century through the political-philosophical lens to catch that Holberg’s servants are highly rebellious with regard to gender and mating.

The domestic servant class lent itself to filling a structural role long since established in Western comedy. Holberg’s renewal lay in assigning them a new moral function. Brandes recognized that “it is not only due to the ancient comedy’s tradition that servants, especially the lackeys, became so important in Holberg’s works.”⁷⁶ To later critics, why the servants were so central has not been clear. Karl Mortensen concludes that one of Holberg’s greatest inventions was turning “antiquity’s kind, spoiled servant [into Henrich], a mix of the merry Bergen student and the Copenhagen lackey.”⁷⁷ Why Holberg did this, besides the resulting merriment, Mortensen suggests not. Leisner-Jensen proposes that Holberg saw in Roman comedy how “the requirement for festiveness was solved by having the young man’s best helper be the servant, and that he therefore created his version of the merry person, Henrich.”⁷⁸

In terms of comedic craft, this rings true, but that is a proximate explanation that fails to engage how Holberg uses domestic servants to carry his thematic argument with regard to mating, one that promotes the changes that the Second Sexual Revolution would bring. If I have made a convincing case in this regard, these romantic comedies should be viewed in a new light. A trope among critics has been that, as a playwright, Holberg used humor and satire only to entertain. That a thinker of his caliber—an ornery loner who dedicated most of his waking hours to scholarly and literary pursuits meant to educate his compatriots—should have no greater ambition but to amuse seems implausible. His comedies are imbued with an understanding of human nature and mating morality that is so penetrating that this should substantially strengthen Holberg’s reputation as an innovative, socially engaged playwright, as well as cement his credentials as a highly original thinker. Of all the prominent philosophers of the eighteenth century, Holberg seems to have had the deepest understanding of gender and mating.

Adaptive vs. Objective Truths

In the Introduction chapter, I argued for the utility of a biocultural perspective when analyzing human mating. Over a century before Darwin,

Holberg naturally was no evolutionary thinker, but his approach aligns with the Darwinian mode of reasoning. He concludes a satirical poem by conceptualizing humans as an “animal that one cannot define.”⁷⁹ In his plays, pair-bonding impulses are summed up from this viewpoint. A young woman’s love is compared to how “a rat loves cheese,”⁸⁰ a suitor is “as beguiled as a rat,”⁸¹ and a couple are “like rats in love.”⁸² His choice of animal suggests that this amorous outsider did not hold in overly high regard the mating moralities of which we convince ourselves. Imbuing this perspective in his comedies, Holberg impels us to realize the relativity of the games we have no choice but to play. There exists no final solution, no norms for men and women that could even begin to appear fair or facilitate a fully rational mating regime. We have progressed so far from our ancestral environment that we are relegated to emotional mismatch without respite. Our best hope is to find a new, somewhat functional mating morality every time our environment has changed so much that our former ideology no longer motivates compliance.

As we, in the twenty-first century, seem to move toward a Fourth Sexual Revolution, we could let ourselves inspire by Holberg’s emphasis on what works—rather than insist on what feels true, or is objectively true. In *Erasmus Montanus*, the wise brother schools the über-logical protagonist, who would rather be right in terms of the earth being round than to marry and reproduce. The brother analogizes, “If I can only get the servants to work, I don’t care if they say the world has eight sides.” With how the play ends, Holberg casts a clear judgment on adaptive versus objective truths. After failing to convince his community, the protagonist cedes, “The earth is as flat as a pancake!” His reward is immediate, as the bride’s father exclaims, “Now you may wed my daughter” (192).

I compare the protagonist to the modern West. Our reason and emotions tell us that our current MFPs are indisputably true, or at least the best conceivable. Especially in Scandinavia, we cannot challenge individual choice, gender equality, abortion, contraception, promiscuity, serial monogamy, or any core element of our mating regime. Not only would I not dare to; I would not want to. Even with the Norwegian fertility rate having fallen from 2.0 to 1.4 in little over a decade,⁸³ it feels preferable to ignore the consequences of a slowly approaching demographic collapse rather than oppose the morality into which I was socialized.⁸⁴ Unfortunately, even the most cherished moralities will cease to matter if those who profess them stop reproducing.

In the next chapter, the nuptial valve of the EMP bursts. The Second Sexual Revolution transforms Stockholm’s nightlife, inspiring Carl Michael Bellman to turn drinking songs into world literature. In his magnum opus, *Fredman’s Epistles*, he extolls the intoxication that can be had from excessive drinking and uncommitted copulation. In an early draft of romantic

love, individual choice applies not only to marriage but also justifies sex for recreational purposes. Over the two decades that he composes the *Epistles*, Bellman grows increasingly concerned with how his era's libertine ideology inspires practices that harm women. Better than any other artistic work, I argue, *Fredman's Epistles* convey why the romantic ideology of the nineteenth century had to reconnect copulation to pair-bonding.

Notes

- 1 Apostolou, *Sexual Selection in Homo sapiens*.
- 2 Lars Roar Langslet, *Den store ensomme* (Oslo: Cappelen, 2001).
- 3 Holberg translated and adapted European thought for a Scandinavian audience. His scholarly works on history, philosophy, and law were influential among the educated, but his widely accessible stage comedies made him perennially beloved among compatriots. His most popular plays are still staged throughout the region. While his dramatic works earned him the nickname "the Molière of the North," Holberg's reputation as a thinker has been diminished by accusations of him lacking originality. Critics have agreed that Holberg's contribution was mostly to bring home Enlightenment thought of which others had conceived.
- 4 Ingeborg W. Owesen, "Ludvig Holberg – en tidligmoderne feminist," *Norsk filosofisk tidsskrift* 45 (2010): 45–54; Sven Hakon Rossel, ed., *Ludvig Holberg: A European Writer: A Study in Influence and Reception* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994).
- 5 Thomas Bredsdorff, "Feminism with a Good Laugh: Holberg, Irony, and Equal Rights," *Scandinavistica Vilnensis* 9 (2014): 17–26, 23.
- 6 Gunnstein Akselberg, "Sosial- og kulturkonstruktivistiske trekk hjå Ludvig Holberg," in Eivind Tjønneland, ed., *Den mangfoldige Holberg* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 2005), 45–72; Brian Kjær Olesen, *Monarchism, Religion, and Moral Philosophy: Ludvig Holberg and the Early Northern Enlightenment*, dissertation, European University Institute, 2016.
- 7 Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.
- 8 Svend Erik Larsen, "Ludvig Holberg: A Man of Transition in the Eighteenth Century," in Mads Rosendahl Thomsen and Dan Ringgaard, eds., *Danish Literature as World Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 53–90, 60.
- 9 Mads Larsen, "Historicist Cosmopolitanism from Scandinavia's First Novel," *Comparative Literature* 74.3 (2022): 345–72; Larsen, *Master-Narrative Transitions*.
- 10 Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).
- 11 Holberg had not read Vico, nor had many others outside of Vico's native Naples. Vico was rediscovered in 1824 and inspired thinkers and artists like Marx, Nietzsche, Yeats, Beckett, Joyce, Auerbach, and Said.
- 12 Apostolou, *Sexual Selection in Homo sapiens*.
- 13 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).
- 14 Mogens Leisner-Jensen, *Scena er på teatro: Studier over Ludvig Holberg og den romerske komedie* (Odense: Odense Universitetsforlag, 1999), 248.
- 15 Langslet, *Den store ensomme*, 318.

- 16 Critics have always credited Holberg for creating a new comedy format through his merger of Roman comedy, Molière, and commedia dell'arte; Bent Holm, "Holberg's Comedies: Intensions and Inspirations," in Knud Haakonssen and Sebastian Olden-Jørgensen, eds., *Ludvig Holberg (1684–1754): Learning and Literature in the Nordic Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 2017), 135–56. They have not been attuned to his innovations in mating morality, his social engagement, and the reasons for why domestic servants are his moral vanguard.
- 17 J. H. Vogt, *Seksualitet og sykdom hos Rousseau og Voltaire – og også om Ludvig Holberg* (Oslo: Norsk Medisinsk Historisk Forening, 1987); F. J. Billeskov Jansen, *Ludvig Holberg og menneskerettighederne – og andre Holbergstudier* (Copenhagen: C. A. Reitzels Forlag, 1999); Langslet, *Den store ensomme*.
- 18 Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670–1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006). Some artists did discuss women's rights, such as Pierre Desfontaines in *Nouveau Gulliver* (1730), but only very carefully; Josephine Grieder, "Kingdoms of Women in French Fiction of the 1780s," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 23 (1990): 140–56.
- 19 François Poulain de la Barre, *Discours physique et moral de l'égalité des deux sexes, où l'on voit l'importance de se défaire des préjugés* (Paris: Jean Du Puis, 1673); François Poulain de la Barre, *De l'éducation des dames pour la conduite de l'esprit dans les sciences and dans les moeurs* (Paris: Jean Du Puis, 1674).
- 20 François Poulain de la Barre, *De l'Excellence des hommes contre l'égalité des sexes* (Paris: Jean Du Puis, 1675).
- 21 Ludvig Holberg, *Introduction til Naturens- og Folke-Rettens Kundskab*, 1716. Holbergsskrifter.dk.
- 22 Ludvig Holberg, *Peder Paars*, 1719–20. Holbergsskrifter.dk.
- 23 Ludvig Holberg, "Zille Hans Dotters Gynaicologia eller Forsvars Skrift for Qvindekjønnen," in *Fire Skiemte-Digte*, 1722. Holbergsskrifter.dk.
- 24 Ludvig Holberg, *Jean de France*, 1723. Holbergsskrifter.dk. With regard to all plays, the in-text parenthesis refers to the year the play was first written. In notes and references, the year refers to the quoted version, which is available at Holbergsskrifter.dk.
- 25 Most English translations are from Ludvig Holberg, Jeppe of the Hill *and Other Comedies*, trans. Gerald S. Argetsinger and Sven H. Rossel (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press). When a play does not have an English translation, instead of referencing the page number in the parenthetical, I refer to the act and scene. In these cases, translations are mine.
- 26 Langslet, *Den store ensomme*.
- 27 Lorentz Dietrichson, *Læredigtet i Nordens poetiske litteratur* (Stockholm: Albert Bonnier, 1860); Peter Andreas Heiberg, *Erindringer af min politiske, selskabelige og litterære Vandel i Frankrig* (Christiania: P.J. Hoppes Forlag, 1830).
- 28 C. W. Smith, *Om Holberg's Levnet og populaere Skrifter* (Copenhagen: K. Schonberg, 1858).
- 29 Georg Brandes, *Ludvig Holberg: Et festskrift* (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske boghandels forlag, 1884), 214–5.
- 30 Vilhelm Andersen, *Illustreret dansk Litteraturhistorie, II* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1934).
- 31 Gudrun Hovde Gvåle, "Ludvig Holberg og quindekjønnen," *Edda* 76 (1976): 27–48; Liv Bliksrud, "Erotikk og 'ubestændighet': Et kvinnetema hos

- Ludvig Holberg.” *Vinduet* 3 (1984): 59–64; Anne Jensen, *Holberg og kvinderne* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1984); Langslet, *Den store ensomme*; Bredsdorff, “Feminism with a Good Laugh”; Mads Larsen, “Bookending the Enlightenment: Scandinavia’s First Novel and the Anthropocene Condemnation of its TV Adaptation,” *Journal of European Studies* 50 (2020): 325–42.
- 32 Owesen, “Ludvig Holberg”; Rossel, *Ludvig Holberg*. Another candidate for the term “first feminist” is Dorothe Engelbretsdatter (1634–1716), Norway’s first recognized female author. Living in a Puritan age, before feminism became a concept, she did not advocate women’s rights as Holberg did. But her success set an example for how also women had the creative power to write literature; Gracia Grindal, *Preaching from Home: The Stories of Seven Lutheran Women Hymn Writers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017). Engelbretsdatter wrote of *puritan love*, a form of companionate love that I considered dedicating a chapter to, but such an investigation would not sufficiently have furthered this book’s argument.
- 33 Jensen, *Holberg og kvinderne*.
- 34 Vogt, *Seksualitet og sygdom*; Billeskov Jansen, *Ludvig Holberg og menneskerettighederne*; Langslet, *Den store ensomme*.
- 35 Thomas Bredsdorff, “Originalitet og import i Holbergs oplysningstænkning,” *1700-tal: Nordic Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 11 (2014): 11–24, 17.
- 36 Holberg writes that our shared human nature, “our natural likeness,” is the ultimate foundation for why we should treat each other with dignity and also reject slavery; Billeskov Jansen, *Ludvig Holberg og menneskerettighederne*, 24.
- 37 Bent Holm, *Ludvig Holberg, a Danish Playwright on the European Stage: Masquerade, Comedy, Satire* (Vienna: Hollitzer Verlag, 2018), 19.
- 38 Brandes, *Ludvig Holberg*; Bredsdorff, “Originalitet og import.”
- 39 Ludvig Holberg, *Heltehistorier, II* (Copenhagen: H. Kongl. Maj. og Univ. Bogtrykkerie, 1739), 121. Holberg’s pragmatism has made some reject that he was a feminist since he did not promote equal *rights*. His position seems to have been that society would benefit from a greater utilization of female talent, regardless of whether women are less, equally, or more talented than men.
- 40 Seccombe, *A Millennium of Family Change*, 133.
- 41 In the period 1500–1600, a third to a half of Northwestern European populations worked as domestic servants in their youth. In early-1700s England, the proportion was 60%; Coontz, *Marriage, a History*. Coontz describes such employment as a rite of passage for both sexes, similar to today’s college. Few were lifelong servants.
- 42 Seccombe, *A Millennium of Family Change*, 227.
- 43 Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family*, 227.
- 44 Ludvig Holberg, *Den Stundesløse*, 1731. Holbergsskrifter.dk.
- 45 Ludvig Holberg, *Mascarade*, 1724. Holbergsskrifter.dk.
- 46 I refer here to reciprocal love. Scholars speculate whether Holberg was ever infatuated with someone. Some conclude that, perhaps once in his youth, Holberg did feel drawn to a girl. Being rich and famous, he had many women proposition him. He enjoyed women’s company as long as they did not show sexual interest; Langslet, *Den store ensomme*.
- 47 Ludvig Holberg, *Moralske Tanker* (Copenhagen: Det Danske Sprog- og Litteraturselskab, 1992), 142.
- 48 Th. A. Müller, *Den unge Ludvig Holberg 1684–1722* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1943).
- 49 Merry E. Wiesner, *Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

- 50 For an earlier version of these interpretations, see Mads Larsen, “Anticipating the Modern Mating Moralities in Holberg’s Comedies,” *Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences* 18.1 (2024): 78–94.
- 51 Ludvig Holberg, *Pernilles korte Frøiken-Stand*, 1731. Holbergsskrifter.dk.
- 52 Seccombe, *A Millennium of Family Change*.
- 53 Svante Nordin, *Romantikens filosofi: Svensk idealism från Höijer till hegelianerna* (Lund: Doxa, 1987).
- 54 Ludvig Holberg, *Erasmus Montanus*, 1731. Holbergsskrifter.dk.
- 55 Apostolou, *Sexual Selection in Homo sapiens*, 27.
- 56 Barbara A. Hanawalt, *The Ties that Bound: Peasant Families in Medieval England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 202.
- 57 Quoted in Holm, *Ludvig Holberg*, 194.
- 58 Ludvig Holberg, *Den Politiske Kandstøber*, 1723. Holbergsskrifter.dk.
- 59 Ludvig Holberg, *Naturens og Folke-Rettens Kundskab*, 1734. Holbergsskrifter.dk.
- 60 Quoted in Holm, *Ludvig Holberg*, 195.
- 61 Chapais, *Primeval Kinship*; Henrich et al., “The Puzzle of Monogamous Marriage”; Gangestad and Grebe, “Human Mating Systems”; Rosenthal, *Mate Choice*; Schmitt, “Fundamental Strategies of Human Mating.”
- 62 Hanne Marie Johansen, “Marriage Trouble, Separation and Divorce in Early Modern Norway,” in Maria Ågren and Amy Louise Erickson, eds., *The Marital Economy in Scandinavia and Britain, 1400–1900* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 175–89.
- 63 Johansen, “Marriage or Money?”
- 64 Ludvig Holberg, *Henrick og Pernille*, 1731. Holbergsskrifter.dk.
- 65 Ludvig Holberg, *Tredje Levnedsbrev*, 1743, 77. Trans. Ole Thomsen. Holbergsskrifter.dk.
- 66 *Pernille’s Brief Experience as a Lady*, 286.
- 67 Norwegian women’s age at first marriage is now 35; Statistics Norway, <https://www.ssb.no/statbank/table/05742/>. The average age for motherhood is 30; Statistics Norway, <https://www.ssb.no/befolkning/fodte-og-dode/statistikk/fodte>.
- 68 Amrita Pande, “Global Reproductive Inequalities, Neo-Eugenics and Commercial Surrogacy in India,” *Current Sociology Monograph* 64 (2016): 244–58.
- 69 Alternatively, we could conclude that anyone possessing human nature should have the ability to predict that the modern West would move toward a regime of serial pair-bonding interspersed with short-term mating; it was what we evolved for. Yet, as we will see in Chapter 7, it was not obvious, even long after the Second Sexual Revolution, in which direction Western mating would evolve. Quite impressive thinkers and artists were not able to sufficiently free themselves from their cultural programming to achieve an understanding of human mating nature similar to that of Holberg.
- 70 Karl Mortensen, *Ludvig Holberg* (Copenhagen: Det Schønbergske forlag, 1925); Jensen, *Holberg og kvinderne*; Leisner-Jensen, *Scena er på teatro*; Langslet, *Den store ensomme*.
- 71 Brandes, *Ludvig Holberg*, 159, 161.
- 72 Leisner-Jensen, *Scena er på teatro*, 268.
- 73 *Pernille’s Brief Experience as a Lady*, 289.
- 74 Leisner-Jensen, *Scena er på teatro*, 248.
- 75 *Mascarade*, II,3; *Henrick og Pernille*, I,2, II,9.
- 76 Brandes, *Ludvig Holberg*, 67.
- 77 Mortensen, *Ludvig Holberg*, 74.

78 Leisner-Jensen, *Scena er på teatro*, 267.

79 Ludvig Holberg, “Apologie for Sangeren Tigellio,” in *Fire Skiemte-Digte*, 1722, 370. Holbergsskrifter.dk.

80 *The Political Tinkerer*, 53.

81 *Jean de France*, 85.

82 *Den Stundesløse*, III,1.

83 Linn Krokedal, “Rekordlav fruktbarhet i 2022,” Statistics Norway, 2023, <https://www.ssb.no/befolkning/fodte-og-dode/statistikk/fodte/artikler/rekordlav-fruktbarhet-i-2022>.

84 Holberg understood how resistant people are to question their own morality, so he constructed his fiction accordingly. He wrote, “I don’t attack the castles directly but through tunnels”; quoted in Holm, “Holberg’s Comedies,” 150.

5 The Libertine Love Experiment

Sex as Intoxication in Bellman's *Epistles* (1770–1790)

Libertine love was the needle that burst the EMP. After the First Sexual Revolution, Western youth typically had to submit to more than a decade of postpuberty celibacy before they could afford to marry. The prohibition of infanticide required strict control over people's sexuality. What I term libertine love convinced young people that they themselves—not their parents, preacher, or God—should decide when, and with whom, they should first have sex. The mating morality of the Romantic Century has mostly been referred to as romantic love, but I separate between post-1750 libertine love and post-1800 romantic love. The former was an ideology that later bohemians would refer to as “free love.” The latter was a response to the dire consequences of promiscuity in an impoverished environment without good contraceptives.¹ As the EMP's nuptial valve burst, not all young people joined the party, but an increasing number did, and they had to explore which norms and values could facilitate functional mating in a regime of individual choice. After generations of Puritans had delegitimized female sexuality, a pivotal question was: who should the modern, sexually liberated woman be?

In *Fredman's Epistles* (1790), Ulla Winblad—the central female character—is offered as the New Woman of the Second Sexual Revolution. Imagined into life at the beginning of the Romantic Century, she could hardly be further away from the female ideal that Puritans had promoted and that which would be put forth by nineteenth-century Romanticists. Ulla does not save herself for lifelong monogamy but drinks, parties, and has passionate sex with Fredman and a host of other men. She is introduced as “fiery, lively, and playful” (3).² Edvard Matz calls her “one of the really great female characters in Swedish literature.”³ Her beauty and promiscuity make her the *Epistles'* ideal woman, whose defining feature is that she “belongs to us all” (48). Ulla is presented as a goddess for the new era whose most sacred contribution to her community is that she “stands bride” every day, meaning that she makes herself sexually available. She symbolizes the women who broke with the ideals of companionate love, insisting on making their own mating decisions.

By turning Ulla into his universe's supreme goddess, Bellman inverts the Madonna-whore dichotomy that had underpinned the early modern EMP. He elevates the value of lower-class, promiscuous women through describing them "with words and tropes meant for women of society's highest strata."⁴ His legitimization of female sexuality was a Nordic high point that would not be matched until a century later with the Modern Breakthrough.⁵

Bellman was inspired by what he himself had experienced when his era's libertinism began to transform Swedish mating practices.⁶ In the Puritan seventeenth century, waves of libertine literature had reflected and impacted behavior in eccentric milieus but had no broad effect on Western mating.⁷ Bellman was part of the wave that broke the dam. Libertinism functioned as a cultural dissolvent that made people increasingly embrace sex as entertainment. This trend spread from the French court to Stockholm's nightlife.⁸ Libertine, hedonistic works, such as those of Voltaire and de Sade, influenced leading circles in Sweden from the 1750s on. In the 1760s, Bellman was a young bourgeois in Stockholm who took advantage of his era's newfound sexual tolerance. Sex outside of marriage was still illegal, but as people's ideology changed, so did their practices. Like many contemporary men—and women—Bellman drank heavily and participated in mating markets with increasingly fluid boundaries between dating, sex work, and recreational copulation.⁹

He captured how compelling he found this lifestyle to be in poems and songs that gained considerable popularity. In the 1760s, he developed the ideology of love that he later would infuse into his innovative *Epistles*, a unique genre inspired by three artforms: (1) drinking songs with roots from antiquity's Anacreon to the eighteenth-century Caveau poets of Paris; (2) his era's bourgeois salon poetry; and (3) the anecdotal form and parodical character types of Italian *commedia dell'arte* and French *opéra comique*.¹⁰ Bellman used this format—which captivated audiences from seedy bars to the royal court—to convey how wonderfully intoxicating uncommitted copulation could be.

In Scandinavia, as across the West, such sentiments motivated behaviors that imposed enormous costs on women. An increase in premarital sex to an exceptional extent resulted in women being left to bear the burden of childcare on their own. Illegitimacy doubled in England, while quadrupling in France and Germany. The number of abandoned babies tripled in Paris. Illegitimacy tripled in Sweden from 1750 to 1820, while doubling in Norway and Finland.¹¹ In Stockholm, half of childbirths were by unwed mothers.¹² These pregnancies were often a result of higher-status men having seduced lower-class women with promises of marriage, while their intentions were libertine.¹³ Parental choice had matched men and women with similar mate values.¹⁴ Individual choice empowered women to pursue the men who aroused the strongest attraction, as a consequence of the

man's traits and resources. The resulting dynamics evoke those of early hominins' promiscuous regime in that women are drawn to a small minority of the most attractive men.¹⁵ Competition over the highest-value men made women vulnerable to exploitation. Some evolutionary psychologists hypothesize that since the mate choice of female *Homo sapiens* always had been restricted by patriarchal structures, women did not develop sufficient defenses against deceitful men.¹⁶ The Second Sexual Revolution created a mismatch between male and female mating psychologies and the new environment of individual choice, a factor that seems to inform many of the mating dysfunctions of the past centuries.¹⁷

To counter this mismatch, hundreds of Western novels were written that warned women against cunning seducers. The modern novel arose and evolved with the Romantic Century. Many novelists sought to educate women on male interiority, so that they more effectively could discern their suitors' intentions—an example of which we will investigate in the next chapter. Bellman's social concerns were similar, but his artistic approach was different. His songs do not offer psychologically credible dramatizations of predatorial courtship or insights into the nuances of male and female mate preferences on markets of individual choice. His characterization is mythical.¹⁸ His work is realistic primarily with regard to mating behavior and social consequences, similar to what was the case with *The Unfaithful Wife* in Chapter 3.

As Bellman grows increasingly wise to the externalities of libertinism, his songs are imbued with a deeper sense of mission. He makes the conflict between sexual freedom and women's well-being a central theme, one that contributes significantly—I argue—to the depth and longevity of *Fredman's Epistles*. Especially the early songs celebrate the great value women offer as men's sex objects. Later songs play out the dark consequences of Bellman's utopia, which harm women who live up to libertine ideals. Bellman conveys how sexual equality will remain elusive for as long as women are unable to transcend the burdens of reproduction. He ends his magnum opus with lines that have been referred to as “among the most wonderful in all of world literature.”¹⁹ In the final song, Bellman retires his libertine universe. Letting his work's ideology be superseded by romantic love may be a pragmatic necessity, but he allows himself, one final time, to turn into music the superior intoxication of hedonistic indulgence. Ulla and Fredman surrender themselves to one more orgy of food, alcohol, music, and what even to the most prudish of critics is an obvious sex fest.²⁰

The *Epistles*' Problematic Raunchiness

Bellman's 82 epistles lack a narrative spine, as they were never meant to be performed in succession. Quick, impressionistic poetry conveys situations

and sentiments, whose most obvious uniting factor is the character gallery. Fredman, Mollberg, Movitz, and Jergen Puckel are among the downtrodden men who worship the gods of love and alcohol at the lower rungs of Stockholm's nightlife. The songs vary greatly in length and accompaniment. Bellman predominantly adapted existing melodies, which was a common practice at the time, but did so with exceptional competence. Johan Kellgren had been among Bellman's most ardent contemporary critics but admitted that the *Epistles* united words and music at the very highest level, a verdict since repeated by many experts.²¹

The *Epistles* develop a thematic arc that engages the era's evolving mating ideology, from mid-century libertinism to what, in a Swedish context, is referred to as the pre-Romantic 1790s.²² In the last songs, Bellman turns the conflict between libertine and romantic love into his final-act climax choice.²³ Under pressure from the impending publication—and with his former nemesis, Kellgren, as editor and “supreme arbiter of taste”—the aging Bellman created works that were “unusually ambitious, both literarily and musically. They are partly classicist [but] also partly marked by a pre-Romantic style of ‘painted’ natural landscapes and strong emotional expressions.”²⁴ Bellman appears even to have written the music himself in a manner that conforms to contemporary ideals. After a lifetime of having been discounted for not mastering the conventional song formats, Bellman proves himself more than capable of performing within the pre-Romantic regime. Lars Lönnroth reads this as an obvious, triumphant response to Kellgren's esthetic criticism. But after demonstrating his artistic proficiency, Bellman doubles down on the *Epistles*' ideology of love.

These songs' lyrical raunchiness has been a problem for critics, although for different reasons as times have changed. Contemporaries could relate to the urban vice that Bellman staged “among these walls of Sodom” (34). Sources from the era describe an eighteenth-century Stockholm of “shallowness, lust, drunkenness, dance, gambling, and prostitution.”²⁵ Informed by classicist ideals, critics did not object to the immorality of such actions but rejected that songs featuring these behaviors among the lower classes could have high esthetic value. Bellman was recognized as Stockholm's greatest entertainer and a genius in several regards. Yet the sentiment among the cultured classes was that he wasted his talents on nonsense.²⁶ The most influential indictment came from a young Kellgren who sought to replace Bellman as the king's favored poet. In a 1778 poem, he accuses Bellman of being a drunkard whose muses are low-class prostitutes and of having learned the language of love at the brothel of an infamous madam.²⁷

Content-wise, Kellgren's criticism appears precise. Bellman's works from the 1760s—and later writings—suggest that he derived inspiration from women of all classes and that he was grateful for having gained erotic

experience from women whom we today might view as sex workers.²⁸ He had a middle-class upbringing but spent his entire adulthood more or less broke before eventually ending up in debtors' prison. When his works describe the horny, violent revelry of the Swedish capital's down and out, Bellman does so with sympathy and an insight into his era's "language of love" that defines his imaginative character as an artist. It would take Kellgren another decade to realize Bellman's genius, but that he eventually did is the reason why the *Epistles* were published and preserved for posterity.²⁹

When Kellgren was gripped by the pre-Romantic sentiments of the 1790s, he still did not appreciate how the *Epistles* had captured the previous era's mating ideology. After a touching reconciliation at a tavern,³⁰ Kellgren proclaimed in a preface that the *Epistles*' exceptional value lay in their esthetic originality. He remained bothered by the songs' crudest eroticism, which he convinced Bellman to tone down. The new top poet of the more moralistic 1780s wrote the preface to lend authority to Bellman's work at a time when its popularity was waning. This was to little avail, as the book sold poorly. When Bellman died five years later, he was buried without a gravestone or funeral party. In spite of the next century's Bellman cult, which elevated him to national poet,³¹ we still do not know the location of his remains. This was fitting, as the Romantics only unearthed the *myth* of Bellman. To claim him as one of their own, a proto-Romantic poet, they misinterpreted the artist and his work, elevating the *Epistles*' raunchy characters to "a comically idealized existence."³² It would take two centuries before critics began to seriously investigate the erotic imagination that fuels Bellman's *magnus opus*, what later eras' prudishness had made scholars steer away from.

The Romantics tended to equate Bellman with Fredman, fulfilling their own need to merge the art with the artist. By the mid-1800s, scholars had untangled that Bellman wrote fiction yet were blind to how his works embodied a local creed of the libertinism that had influenced Western mating. In 1852, Per Atterbom claimed that Bellman was exceptionally Swedish—entirely "un-French"—in that he stood outside of his era's tastes. His erotic burlesque was in reality "the romantic" dressed in "the shine and fragrance of the summer night."³³ By this time, the Romantics had won the culture war and reined in people's promiscuity.³⁴ In this more Puritan climate, Bellman received a more critical assessment, which tore him off the Romantic pedestal. Anders Fryxell directed his moral indignation at Bellman himself, his low-life characters, and the *Epistles*' "rampant indecency" and "animalistic pleasures."³⁵ August Strindberg railed against how his moralistic countrymen worshiped a man like Bellman, devaluing the artist morally and esthetically. Strindberg's attack coincided with a lull in the Bellman cult during the realist and naturalist movements of the 1870s and 1880s. With the neo-Romanticism of the 1890s, Bellman was back in vogue.³⁶

Early-twentieth-century scholarship explored the relationship between Bellman's characters and their real-life models. Olof Byström and Nils Afzelius laid to rest the Romantic myth of the *Epistles* having been created through improvisation, revealing the "the painstakingly conscious process by which some of Bellman's verse was composed."³⁷ After the Third Sexual Revolution—which was underpinned by the pill that let women transcend the burdens of reproduction—people reembraced recreational copulation but began to criticize Bellman's idealization of alcohol. Scholars to a greater extent focused on the texts themselves, often to explore genre or rhetoric. In 1995, Bengt-Olov Linder bemoaned how Bellman rarely had been read as a poet. His musical brilliance and exceptional lyricism have made his *Epistles* remain among Sweden's most popular songs, but these qualities have stood in the way of Bellman being *read*, except in a shallow and sporadic manner.³⁸ Many have thought of him less as a poet and more as a troubadour obsessed with love, albeit with fanciful concepts of the ideal woman and how the sexes should mate.

Carl Fehrman pointed out the fact that many scholars have examined the role of alcohol in the *Epistles*, but few have investigated how the male characters "relate to women and love."³⁹ A trope has been that Bellman is exceptionally "hard to interpret."⁴⁰ The sentiment now has become that Bellman's complexity should be no excuse for not trying to dig deeper into the content of his poetry. A 2015 anthology set out precisely to read Bellman, to situate his works in the literary and cultural–historical contexts of his own time and those of later generations, with a focus on the *Epistles* as world literature.⁴¹ This is the critical movement to which I seek to contribute with the following reading of *Fredman's Epistles*.

Promiscuity vs. Pair-Bonding

Bellman first wrote *FE 5*; he did not number his epistles according to the chronology of their creation. In what has been deemed a "primitive" work,⁴² a conventional drinking song, Bellman extolls the virtue of men drinking together to escape the hostile world that surrounds them. For millennia, such an ethos had defined drinking songs.⁴³ Already in the subsequent composition, *FE 6*, Bellman adds women and dance. *FE 2* formulates the basic tenets of these men's ideology; Fredman appeals to a woman, "Dearest sister, hey! Never say me nay, Say but yes and we'll be jolly." Women who heed his call are offered to bathe in booze and are told, "Tis thy profession Men to lead in pleasure's path." Women and booze are delineated as forms of intoxication, although in this song, Fredman finds booze to be the superior one. This contest between Venus and Bacchus continues through the *Epistles*.

Henrik Gustafsson reads this central opposition to engage whether committed relationships can be preferable to maximizing one's intoxication in the moment, a strategy that sends the alcoholic toward death.⁴⁴ However, in these early epistles, women have not yet come to represent the goddess of long-term love. Leif Landen proposes that these women are best understood as "Venus vulgivaga,"⁴⁵ the goddess of prostitution, a lowlier Venus who favors the desires of common men. Such interchangeable women are excellent sex objects, yet get ranked below alcohol more than ten times.⁴⁶ Only in the later pastoral epistles does Venus have a chance against Bacchus. In the world that Fredman first inhabits, recreational copulation offers wonderful intoxication, but such a utilization of women merely confirms Fredman's philosophy of pleasure. Women are but another means for feeling better, barely distinguishable from alcohol: "I look at both, and laugh at both, but still separate them" (2).

The fact that women rank slightly below booze yet gain value as the narrative enters into pastoral landscapes suggests that Fredman's male collective starts out with a suboptimal understanding of the value women can offer. Bellman portraying these men's philosophy of love to be so simplistic lends support to Sven Thorén's claim that Fredman's ideology is best understood as "a parody alternative to Christianity." He interprets Bellman not to embrace hedonism wholeheartedly.⁴⁷ The *Epistles'* early songs establish the thematic conflict as being one between libertine and companionate love, but this opposition is later complicated through the introduction of sentiments that are evocative of romantic love. At first, Bellman lets his characters play out their libertine ideology. *FE 2* ends by formulating the new era's supreme dictum: "Booze, drink, and have your lass, that's what Saint Fredman teaches." The message is accompanied by fun, light-hearted music.

In the English Bacchanalian literature of this era, drinking localities were mostly masculine, while women waited at home. Bellman includes women as sexual, social, and moral equals.⁴⁸ *FE 10* expresses his ungendered ethos: "Give free rein to our lusts; Each follow their desire; Forget all of life's worries." Such gender relations align with what Randolph Trumbach refers to as the era's embrace of the possibility of true equality.⁴⁹ Later epistles reveal how naïve it was to think that such a possibility could be realized at this time. *FE 9* exemplifies how the *Epistles'* early songs portray Fredman's universe not as part of a societal whole but as a self-contained utopia:

Music all day and wenches all night.
Bacchus comes to table,
Cupid if he's able;
Here are all things, here am I!

Lönnroth finds that the first handful of epistles—written March–May, 1770—express a jolly world. Bellman’s poetry then darkens.⁵⁰ Lönnroth locates the next turning point after the first 25 epistles, which had been completed by December 1770.⁵¹ Bellman thought of epistles 1–25 and 26–50 as subunits of the overall work. The second unit’s narratives expand beyond the naïve, self-contained world of Fredman’s revelry to reveal a more realistic Stockholm full of threat, especially to promiscuous women. Ingmar Simonsson refers to these compositions as songs that expose injustices through staging the grim destinies of men who are assaulted and women who are raped.⁵² After having established the libertine ethos and lifestyle, a main mission becomes to play out their consequences for women like Ulla. Bellman’s poetry expresses deep concern for how the unfolding sexual revolution victimizes women who participate as men’s equals. Simonsson interprets sexual assaults to be the main topic of two consecutive epistles. In *FE* 28, to a subtle melancholy melody, Bellman gut-wrenchingly portrays how two policemen rape Ulla:

She turn’d about, her veil it flutter’d
 In mute dismay.
 Tears fill’d her eyes, no cry she utter’d,
 Ah, tell me, say:
 A woman’s tears, dishevell’d tresses
 And a tremulous voice,
 What more with grief than these distresses
 Man’s breast annoys?

By engaging in promiscuous sex, whether for money or not, Ulla becomes a moral outcast on whom men can prey.⁵³ In Fredman’s world, she is the supreme goddess, but the hegemonic culture still enforces the misogynist mating ideology that had underpinned the EMP.⁵⁴ As representatives of the law rape her, Ulla prays to the sky, “And the nymph e’en damns the myrtle Which Freya gave.” By having Ulla curse her own sexual capabilities, granted to her by the goddess of love, Bellman emphasizes the burden women must bear for being the coveted sex under a promiscuous regime. Without cultural protection, female sexuality cannot be free. Bellman accuses, “Stern is the pow’r which love constraineth So murd’rously!” After the rape, Ulla stares at “the temple” (28). Simonsson interprets this as the town hall that Ulla ironically looks to for justice, knowing society is against her.⁵⁵ *FE* 29 features another rape, this time by a count at a party. We get the impression that men of authority abuse women of the lower classes. The victim has her clothes torn off, loses her necklace, and screams of the betrayal, “defiled another time.”

Unmarried women without conventional jobs could at any time be imprisoned to do forced labor.⁵⁶ This destiny befalls Ulla in *FE* 36. Four men pull her away, screaming, from the tavern she was delighting with her presence. The clientele is crestfallen, staring at the empty, broken cup Ulla left behind. They conclude that “thus ended our party.” In the final verse, Fredman expresses the powerlessness of his libertine apostles. He can but encourage Ulla to suffer her punishment while she dreams of the sexual paradise to which she eventually can return. Bellman letting Fredman offer such a meager consolation speaks to the impossibility of their utopia and the unfairness of its implementation. For men, free love is a compelling proposition that aligns with men’s higher desire for partner variety.⁵⁷ For women, burdened with the larger social stigma—and pregnancies—libertinism could come with enormous costs.

In *FE* 43, Ulla gives birth to a child with an unnamed father. While births are mostly joyous in literature, notes Randi Larsen,⁵⁸ this epistle’s slow, sad melody makes Bellman refer to it as an elegy. Larsen interprets the baby to be a snake in Fredman’s paradise, one that will doom Ulla. Her good looks are her greatest asset but also what seals her fate:

Beauty, what rue!
Deaths in thousands all around thee glower.
Even in this loving hour
Thou must taste of death’s dread power:
Worm in blossom hid foretells the flower is dead.

When Ulla calls out for help, she appeals not to the goddess of protection but of sex. Larsen reads this to reflect Ulla not being married and therefore not entitled to society’s protection.⁵⁹ Alf Kjellén thinks this epistle was inspired by the birth that Ulla’s real-life model gave in 1765.⁶⁰ Maria Kristina Kiehlström had been seduced by a nobleman who had promised marriage but left her pregnant with a girl who died eight days old. She was later impregnated by a married soldier.⁶¹ Bellman turns such destinies into touching drama also in *FE* 35 and 75. Fredman helps a woman place her child at an orphanage. Movitz can do little but wish that his acquaintance, a pregnant prostitute, will find a man willing to help raise her child. He advises that she “not give herself for free to her customers, but charge appropriately for the love she can give.”⁶² Bellman’s characters see no other solution than to drown in alcohol “love’s resentment and suffering” (75).

Alfhild Dvergsdal reads Ulla as a parallel to Christ.⁶³ Her suffering for the libidinous sins of men can be viewed as an intertext to the story of the Epistles of Paul. Bellman ascribes antisociality to male promiscuity on several occasions, not only to the rich and powerful but also to Fredman’s

circle. The hunchback Jergen Puckel is defined by his willingness to do anything to seduce a woman, “to unscrupulously conquer the girls.”⁶⁴ In *FE* 73, he sells his soul to the devil so that “I shall all women defile [and] never think about my wife.”

Bellman may offer one of literary history’s most captivating portrayals of the libidinous lifestyle, but he does so without simplistic idealization and with concern for the suffering of women. Fehrman called for feminist perspectives on how Bellman portrays women and love, expecting that “Swedish literature’s most enthusiastic worshipper of women” risked being labeled “a male chauvinist.”⁶⁵ The paucity of such contemporary criticism suggests that the *Epistles*, as an artistic unity, so effectively convey a sympathy for women that this makes up for how Bellman’s male characters so passionately relate to females primarily as sex objects.

Bellman’s Personal View of Love

When Ulla returns to Fredman’s circle in *FE* 48, she brings her fiancé Norström; the goddess of libertinism is now a pair-bonded woman.⁶⁶ On their excursion to the pastoral Djurgården outside of Stockholm, Bellman sets the stage for his cycle’s final-act climax choice between short- and long-term mating. Fredman demeans the fiancé, calling him “little Norström,” telling him to “dampen your desire, we all have equal rank.” The consequence of other men still feeling entitled to have sex with Ulla, their goddess, plays out in the final verse:

And our Ulla, pale and sick,
Drops her skirt beneath her;
Clambers into bed forlorn,
Movitz after, with his horn.
Make way, Norström, I’ll be sworn
She’s all ours together!

Two additional copulations with Ulla end the work. The pastoral setting, elevated music, and lyrical introductions suggest that Fredman’s drinking buddies have learned their lesson, which is that the Romantic way of life is preferable to enjoying oneself to death. The narrative does not. In *FE* 80—which is dedicated to Kellgren—Mollberg has invited Ulla to Djurgården. Carina Burman concludes that instead of embracing pastoral values, Mollberg and Ulla accelerate their enjoyment of life.⁶⁷ The *Epistles’* form has evolved with the pre-Romantic times, Ulla wears the new era’s fashion, and the descriptions of her actions are more euphemistic. Yet she is more of a love goddess than ever, still of the lowlier kind who favors the desires of common men. As the music builds from soft idyll to aggressive lust,

Bellman makes it clear that nothing has changed with regard to his work's ideology of love. Ulla and Mollberg end the epistle passed out snoring after another sexual excess. The final lines are sung to soft, harmonious music.

FE 82 offers a similar finale. Lönnroth reads the epistle like a Last Supper, Fredman's farewell before his upcoming death.⁶⁸ The pastoral setting lends itself to a moral transition, but Bellman retains his work's ideological integrity. What his personal position was on the conflict between companionate, libertine, and romantic love, we know not. Thorén concludes that it remains a puzzle whether Bellman was a hedonist or kept his religious convictions. We just know that "Bellman sings of timely ideological questions in which he was deeply engaged."⁶⁹ Also Linder thinks it unwise to try to deduce Bellman's own views from his poetry.⁷⁰

Unlike their creator, Fredman and Ulla show no ambiguity with regard to the ethos by which they have lived. Lönnroth reads their concluding tryst to symbolize that, since they are able to unite Bacchus with Venus, they overcome death. When Ulla chooses to give herself "to others than the boring fiancé Norström," she becomes "a heavenly bride" in Fredman's ideological universe.⁷¹ Tellingly, Norström is the only character unable to create music. I read him to represent the pragmatic, companionate love that libertine love had negated; Fredman's farewell does not entail a return to the ideology that had underpinned the EMP. Lönnroth reads Fredman's exit not to be just from Ulla but from the entire reality Fredman has narrated through his epistles. I interpret Fredman's farewell as Bellman retiring the transitional mating ideology that he himself had lived by in his youth but which by 1790 had lost most of its cultural allure.

Gustafsson supports my position. He interprets the *Epistles* to portray long-term pair-bonding as a superior alternative to the hopeless, demoralizing ethos of pleasure by which Fredman's circle has lived. On some level, Bellman's characters long for lasting love, but they are unable to accept the emerging Romantic ideology. Since they reject the value women offer as long-term partners, their Bacchanalian lifestyle must eventually regress from happy togetherness to destructive loneliness. Libertine love is too "unstable and paradoxical" to make for a lasting foundation.⁷² But to what sort of future does the work point, asks Gustafsson?

Conceivably, Bellman envisioned an ideology similar to that of later Romantic novelists such as August Lafontaine.⁷³ Bellman had always proselytized strong emotions. The leap needs not be great from fetishizing women as a source of intense short-term mating emotions to being a source of intense long-term mating emotions. The later *Epistles* convey that mere copulation offers a poor foundation for a social order, irrespective of how stimulating such behavior can be for men at least in the short term. By the time of his late compositions, Bellman had become a family man. He had married when he was 37 and fathered five sons. Lars Huldén describes

him as a tender father and husband.⁷⁴ The fact that he as a 50-year-old composed his final epistles in a manner that extolls promiscuity, I read to be about artistic integrity not nostalgic delusion. It would be melodramatic to offer a happy, Romantic ending that negated the libertine creed that his characters always had embodied so intriguingly. His locating of *FE* 79 in the year 1785 suggests that he viewed his old world as already having passed.

The final lines of *FE* 82 tie a ribbon to Bellman's artistic time capsule. Fredman is no longer the orator, and Bellman changes his verse from present to past tense. The concluding sentiment speaks to a brief period when some Europeans, eager to make their own decisions in terms of copulation and pair-bonding, let themselves be seduced by the utopia of free love and limitless intoxication:

Let Love abound,
 All Fröja's seed rewarding,
 By Bacchus gown'd!
 A last time upon this greensward
 A bride was Ulla Winblad crown'd
 A bride was Ulla crown'd.

Bellmanian Feminism

The Romantics had to misinterpret Bellman's ideology of love in order to claim him as one of their own. My interpretation of *Fredman's Epistles* can also be used to label him a Romantic.⁷⁵ My evolutionary perspective on the Romantic Century—as a response to the end of the EMP—makes Bellman's libertine love an early version of romantic love, that is, an ideology that facilitates individual choice. In the past, scholarship tended to exaggerate the Romantic period's unity in terms of literary preoccupations, sensibilities, and political allegiances. More recent studies emphasize that not all Romantics sanctified the idea that men and women were complementary halves who should seek wholeness through a lifelong pair-bond of deep love. The century's pluralism of mating ideologies fits under my definition of romantic love, as beliefs that side with individual choice—although certain Romantic creeds argued for the necessity of some parental meddling. Which norms and values the individual's choice should be informed by varied, but the Romantic movement helped make culturally hegemonic the view that mating decisions predominantly should be made by the man and woman in question. Those who during this period insisted on continued parental authority clung to the past era's ideology of companionate love.

Bellman's portrayal of Ulla is central to his project. From how I interpret the *Epistles*, Bellman posits that individual choice can only be real

if women themselves can choose how to live out their sexuality—even if they choose as excessively as Ulla. We can question how psychologically credible Bellman's female characters are, but that would miss the point. Linder argues that Bellman's mythical portrayal of women—as opposed to the finely delineated characters of Rousseau—results in a lack of female empowerment.⁷⁶ I consider this interpretation misguided. I understand Ulla in the tradition of farce comedies, as a woman whose promiscuity is celebrated as part of a thematic argument for individuals' right to copulate without commitment.⁷⁷ Ulla is mostly a symbol for female sexual agency; she functions as an ideological lever meant to affect change. To ask, like Huldén does, how Ulla feels about being sexually available for so many men is less relevant. He is puzzled by how she can make it to the end of the *Epistles* “without severe psychological problems.”⁷⁸ I doubt if many contemporary listeners wondered the same. Only with the modern novel did interior credibility become of paramount importance. I read Bellman to offer Ulla as a New Woman whom society should accept so that real women become empowered to explore alternatives to the sexual straight-jacket imposed on them by early modern Puritanism. As John Stuart Mill would argue a century later, we cannot know women's nature before they have been given the same opportunities as men.⁷⁹

Admittedly, Bellman was not feminist if evaluated from a post-Romantic perspective. Anne Mellor's investigation of Romanticism and gender reveals how the *Epistles* embody what would become the common Romantic approach to the feminine. Her descriptions seem tailored to how Bellman portrays women. Male characters do not embrace “the female as a valued other [but] effaces her into a narcissistic projection of his own self [to] find in female form a mirror image of himself [which is] the assimilation of the female into the male.” The Romantic poet would appropriate whatever he deemed valuable of the feminine, consigning the rest to silence.⁸⁰ Bellman's women clearly are male fantasies. Gustaf Ljunggren finds them to be fairly alike: loving women who like to dance and drink.⁸¹ “The role of liberated women in this utopia is but to love, without jealousy or envy or shame,” writes Mellor, asking whom such free love serves.⁸²

In the emancipatory movement of the late eighteenth century, marriage was by some viewed as another yoke from which the European individual should be freed. Bellman may have written in this tradition, but as my interpretation attested, as his *Epistles* matured, a main mission became to convey how women suffered under such emancipatory efforts. As long as women were still socially and professionally subjugated, they could not be men's sexual equals, as women *needed* marriage for provision and protection. In Bellman's utopia, promiscuous women may offer men wonderful intoxication, but his *Epistles* dramatize how what feels good must not lead to the best social outcomes. In such instances, experiencing what feels

good vicariously through art can be a superior alternative. I propose that this mechanism of fiction—in Bellman’s case, of letting men experience vicariously the intoxication of libertinism—explains much of the astounding popularity and longevity of his magnum opus.

Hedonism ad Absurdum

Works of art, such as *Fredman’s Epistles*, offered content that let Western populations discuss how mating should be conducted in modern societies. Bellman’s songs convey unique insights into how this ideological contestation was conceptualized in the Swedish capital. In the end, Fredman’s new religion offered no eschatological hope, merely an escape through death, which sanctioned destructiveness.⁸³ Bellmanian love could envision nothing nobler than to party oneself to death. Through letting libertine thought manifest itself this way, *ad absurdum*, Bellman undermined the hedonism that had captured his era.⁸⁴ For elites, fornication after royal balls may alleviate boredom. For the lower classes, Bellman’s art showed how the moral dissolution of the 1760s and 1770s predominantly resulted in harm.⁸⁵

A trope in Bellman scholarship has been to claim that he was indifferent to large social movements. Some viewed him as a childish bohemian who worshiped God, the king, women, and booze but without considering how these fit together. He purportedly took nothing seriously and lacked a deep central idea. He may have expressed his era’s mood but had little social engagement.⁸⁶ Some newer scholarship has moved on from this simplistic understanding. My reading and contextualization attest to how *Fredman’s Epistles* engage the most consequential of the era’s movements, that Bellman took libertine externalities very seriously, and that his central idea was that promiscuity can offer compelling intoxication but no foundation for a social order. His works certainly captured the era’s mood, but in a manner that—in particular with regard to women—testifies to his profound social engagement.

In the next chapter, I investigate the work of another author whom critics have struggled to understand. At the tail end of the Romantic Century, Emilie Flygare-Carlén became Sweden’s best-selling author with a long line of romance novels. In *The Magic Goblet*, she responds to the Romantic ideology that had reconnected copulation to pair-bonding. Through the idealization of deep emotions, young people were encouraged to only have sex within a lifelong marriage of true love. This ideology’s exaggeration of the power and durability of human pair-bonding emotions compelled women to obsess with the highest-value men who aroused the strongest affect. With exceptional psychological insight, Flygare-Carlén stages how this mating morality made her era’s subjugated women vulnerable to

predatorial courtship. *The Magic Goblet's* superior male has a personality marked by what evolutionary psychologists refer to as Dark Triad traits, a combination of narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism. Especially in modern mating markets, such men can be highly effective and exploitative seducers. Flygare-Carlén offers insights that can help women recognize such men, but her main mission is to argue against a mating regime that portrays human emotions as the ultimate source of truth.

Notes

- 1 Ideological strains evocative of romantic love existed also prior to 1800. The Romantic Century consisted of a plethora of moralities imbued in, and promoted by, various artistic works. In this chapter and the next, I investigate two such ideologies, but the specifics of these do not necessarily represent their era's hegemonic beliefs.
- 2 *Fredman's Epistles* 3; hereafter, only 3—the song number—in parenthesis. Italics and indents from the original text are not included. Most English translations are from Austin, *Fredman's Epistles & Songs*. For songs not covered by Austin, translations are mine. My gratitude to Niklas Salmose for his assistance with the translations.
- 3 Edvard Matz, *Carl Michael Bellman: Nymfer och friskt kalas* (Lund: Historiska Media, 2004), 31.
- 4 Annie Mattsson, "Bellman och Hymen: En studie av Bellmans bröllopsdiktning," *Sammlaren* 124.3 (2003): 5–43, 34.
- 5 I could argue that not even the most bohemian authors of the Modern Breakthrough matched Bellman's promotion of female promiscuity and that his high-water mark with regard to legitimizing female sexuality was not matched until the Third Sexual Revolution. Questions of interpretation, which I return to at the end of this chapter, complicate making too-specific claims.
- 6 Austin, *The Life and Songs*.
- 7 James Turner accounts for the libertine excesses in English literature around the mid-seventeenth century. After the Puritan 1640s and 1650s, libertinism marked the 1660s and 1670s, then subsided; Turner, *Libertines and Radicals in Early Modern London*. In more influential seventeenth-century thought, such as that of John Milton, "the true libertine is, of course, Satan"; Singer, *The Nature of Love* 2, 254. Companionate ideology portrayed sexual passion as a threat to marital stability. The period's dualism inspired a view of sexual lust and conjugal affection as incompatible. The Romantic movement united lust and love.
- 8 Libertinism was prominent under Louis XV whose reign ended in 1774; Randi Larsen, "Slangen i Bacchi paradiset: Analyse af Epistel nr. 23 og 43," in Per Olsen, Randi Larsen, and Hans Lundsteen, eds., *Tøm nu dit glas se Døden på dig venter: Nye vinkler på Bellman* (Hellerup: Forlaget Spring, 2015), 115–41.
- 9 Rebecka Lennartsson, *Mamsell Bohmans fall: Nattlöperskor i 1700-talets Stockholm* (Gothenburg: Kriterium, 2019).
- 10 Carl Fehrman, *Vin och flickor och Fredmans stråke: Bellman och visans vägar* (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1977).
- 11 Secombe, *A Millennium of Family Change*; Coontz, *Marriage, a History*; Amy Louise Erickson, "The Marital Economy in Comparative Perspective," in

- Maria Ågren and Amy Louise Erickson, eds., *The Marital Economy in Scandinavia and Britain, 1400–1900* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 3–20.
- 12 These unwed mothers were almost exclusively from the lower classes; Borgström, “Emilie Flygare-Carlén och ‘äktenskapets politik’.”
 - 13 Predatory seducers were not just from the highest classes. Daughters from small farms often became pregnant with sons of more prosperous farmers or burgers who had promised marriage; Johansen, “Marriage or Money?”
 - 14 After the Second Sexual Revolution, marriages continued mostly to pair up men and women of similar social standing. Individual choice did not lead to a large increase in mixed-class marriages; Johansen, “Marriage or Money?” Individual choice has the most profound effect on short-term markets as a result of women’s market advantage with regard to uncommitted copulation. Especially in impoverished environments, women are incentivized to take reproductive risks to better their economic status. When competition over men is strong, women more often use pregnancy as a means to increase their chances for a long-term pair-bond; Abby Chipman and E. Morrison, “The Impact of Sex Ratio and Economic Status on Local Birth Rates,” *Biology Letters* 9.2 (2013): 20130027.
 - 15 Chapais, *Primeval Kinship*.
 - 16 Apostolou, *Sexual Selection in Homo sapiens*.
 - 17 Cari D. Goetz et al., “Evolutionary Mismatch in Mating,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 10 (2019): 2709.
 - 18 Austin, *The Life and Songs*.
 - 19 Bengt-Olov Linder, *Vår försummade Bellman* (Stockholm: Carlssons, 1995), 140.
 - 20 Olle Holmberg, “Gåtor för damerna i Fredmans Epistlar,” *Svensk Litteraturtidskrift* 30.4 (1967): 188–92.
 - 21 Jerome McGann refers to the eighteenth century’s poetic embrace of sensibility and sentiment as an expression of the era’s “momentous cultural shift,” an event that “all but founded the novel.” Bellman’s utilization of his exceptional musical and poetic sensibilities in his re forging of the drinking song was part of this revolution. McGann writes that this art movement’s cultural effect was achieved through “developing new and non-traditional modes of expression—styles that were the dress of their new thoughts”; Jerome J. McGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1, 5–6.
 - 22 When I write Romantic with a capital first letter, I refer to something related to the nineteenth century’s Romantic movement. As always, I write romantic love with a small first letter.
 - 23 In Western storytelling, narratives tend to end with the protagonist having to make a choice in the climax moment of the final act, facing two options: (1) to act in accordance with the character weakness they have had from before the story began, or (2) to show that the unfolding story has made them a better person by choosing the alternative that entails overcoming their character weakness. Commercial art tends to opt for the latter choice. Bellman chooses more ambitiously by committing to the former, which structurally makes *Fredman’s Epistles* a tragedy; Mads Larsen, “Imposing New Hollywood Structure on the Remake of *3:10 to Yuma*,” in Andrew Gay and Ann Igelström, eds., *The Bloomsbury Handbook of International Screenplay Theory* (Bloomsbury Publishing, forthcoming).
 - 24 Lars Lönnroth, *Ljuva karneval! Om Carl Michael Bellmans diktning* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 2005), 299.

- 25 Lennartsson, *Mamsell Bohmans fall*, 87.
- 26 Austin, *The Life and Songs*; Carina Burman, *Bellman: biografen* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 2019).
- 27 Johan Henric Kellgren, “Mina löjen,” <https://kalliope.org/en/text/kellgren/2020013001>.
- 28 Burman, *Bellman*.
- 29 The immediate effect of Kellgren’s attack, agree biographers, was to discourage Bellman from composing additional epistles; Austin, *The Life and Songs*; Burman, *Bellman*; Carl Fehrman, *Vinglas och timglas I Bellmans värld* (Lund: Absalon, 1995). Bellman spent the next decade chasing artistic credibility in more respected formats that were a poorer match for his talents. Him being dissuaded from continuing his proto-Romantic pursuit resulted in that the 100 epistles he had decided to write after his early-1770s burst of creativity never came to be.
- 30 Austin, *The Life and Songs*.
- 31 Johan Stenström, *Bellman levde på 1800-talet* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2009).
- 32 Leif Landen, *Carl Michael Bellman: En biografi* (Stockholm: Carlssons, 2008), 330.
- 33 Per Atterbom, *Svenska siare och skalder* (Uppsala: Lundequist, 1852).
- 34 As I have stated previously, such cultural processes are too complex for any causal claims to be made with precision. I consider it reasonable to presume that the Romantic movement influenced people’s thoughts and behavior. Edward Shorter thinks the movement’s sexual purity literature had little effect on people’s mating behavior; Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family*. From 1850 on—after decades of Romantic literature that encouraged life-long monogamy—illegitimacy began plummeting across the West. A myriad of influences contributed to this change, but it seems hasty to disregard the influence of fiction.
- 35 Anders Fryxell, *Berättelser ur svenska historien 45–46* (Stockholm: Hiertas, 1878).
- 36 Linder, *Vår försummade Bellman*, 132–6.
- 37 Carol J. Clover, “Improvisation in ‘Fredmans Epistlar,’” *Scandinavian Studies* 44.3 (1972): 310–35, 310.
- 38 Linder, *Vår försummade Bellman*.
- 39 Fehrman, *Vinglas och timglas*, 133.
- 40 Nils Afzelius, “Konstnärer tolkar epistlerna,” in Lars-Göran Eriksson, ed., *Kring Bellman* (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 1964), 61–80, 62; Fehrman, *Vinglas och timglas*, 101; Lars Huldén, *Carl Michael Bellman* (Stockholm: Natur och kultur, 1994), 106; Linder, *Vår försummade Bellman*, 9.
- 41 Per Olsen, Randi Larsen, and Hans Lundsteen, eds., *Töm nu dit glas se Døden på dig venter: Nye vinkler på Bellman* (Hellerup: Forlaget Spring, 2015).
- 42 Burman, *Bellman*, 165.
- 43 Henrik Gustafsson, “Venus jag följer, med Backus jag flyr: Kring en ideologisk konflikt i Bellmans bacchanaliska diktning,” *Edda* 4 (2001): 374–84.
- 44 Gustafsson, “Venus jag följer.”
- 45 Landen, *Carl Michael Bellman*, 336.
- 46 Ragnar Ekholm, “Bellmans Bacchanaliska Qwäden,” *Bellmansstudier* 2 (1926): 59–77.
- 47 Sven Thorén, “Fredmans religion – ett paradiskt alternativ till kristendomen,” in Bellmansällskapet, eds., *Ur Bellmans värld och Fredmans* (Stockholm: Carlssons, 1991), 103–29, 103.

- 48 Within Bellman's moral universe, promiscuous women are in several ways superior to men. Women being the selecting sex on short-term markets offers significant social and other benefits. One advantage is the ability to charge men for sex, which Bellman's female characters seem to practice to various extents.
- 49 The Second Sexual Revolution heralded the beginning of the end for the patriarchal family structure, which had been the ideal since the First Sexual Revolution. A process unfolded toward more egalitarian households consisting of a man and a woman who were equal in authority, although complementary in skills and traits—a stance that in practice drove continued gender inequality. The eighteenth century's preoccupation with equality and individual agency expressed itself also in the liberal-democratic and anti-slavery movements; Randolph Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family: Aristocratic Kinship and Domestic Relations in Eighteenth-Century England* (New York: Academic Press, 1978).
- 50 Lönnroth, *Ljuva karneval!*
- 51 Burman, *Bellman*.
- 52 Ingmar Simonsson, "Bellmans viser om retfærd," in Per Olsen, Randi Larsen, and Hans Lundsteen, eds., *Tøm nu dit glas se Døden på dig venter: Nye vinkler på Bellman* (Hellerup: Forlaget Spring, 2015), 386–417, 404.
- 53 In the introductory chapter, I referred to libertine love not as an ideology upon which Westerners built a social order but as a cultural dissolvent, which undermined companionate love. Mainstream culture did not embrace uncommitted copulation. Young people's looser sex practices led to a crescendo of complaints; Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family*.
- 54 Libertinism was meant to free both men and women to make individual choices in matters of mating. Bellman reveals the hypocrisy with which the ideology was practiced. James Turner, like other critics of the period, challenges the "liberationist claim of libertinism, since its doctrine of sexual freedom is always complicated by the politics of class and gender"; Turner, *Libertines and Radicals*, x.
- 55 Simonsson, "Bellmans viser om retfærd."
- 56 Lennartsson, *Mamsell Bohmans fall*.
- 57 Buss and Schmitt, "Sexual Strategies Theory."
- 58 Larsen, "Slangen i Bacchi paradis."
- 59 Larsen, "Slangen i Bacchi paradis."
- 60 Alf Kjellén, *Bellman som bohem och parodiker: Studier i hans diktning* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1971).
- 61 Huldén, *Carl Michael Bellman*; Rebecka Lennartsson, *Ulla Winblad: Liv och legend* (Stockholm: Stockholmia, 2021).
- 62 Linder, *Vår försummade Bellman*, 124.
- 63 Alfhild Dvergsdal, "Den oppbyggelige Bellman? En undersøgelse af Bellmans epistler og hans evangeliedigte," in Per Olsen, Randi Larsen, and Hans Lundsteen, eds., *Tøm nu dit glas se Døden på dig venter: Nye vinkler på Bellman* (Hellerup: Forlaget Spring, 2015), 18–54.
- 64 Trond Haugen, *Forgjengelighetens poetikk: En studie i Carl Michael Bellmans Fredmans epistlar* (Oslo: Unipub, 2004), 93; Nils Afzelius, *Myt och bild: Studier i Bellmans dikt* (Stockholm: Prisma, 1964).
- 65 Fehrman, *Vinglas och timglas*, 133.
- 66 For another version of these interpretations, see Mads Larsen, "Libertine Love as a Proto-Romantic Mating Ideology in *Fredmans epistlar*," *Scandinavian Studies* 97.1 (2025).

- 67 Burman, *Bellman*.
- 68 Lönnroth, *Ljuva karneval!*
- 69 Thorén, "Fredmans religion," 125.
- 70 Linder, *Vår försummade Bellman*.
- 71 Lönnroth, *Ljuva karneval!*, 333.
- 72 Gustafsson, "Venus jag följer," 379.
- 73 August Lafontaine (1758–1831) was a hyper-productive, best-selling German novelist whose moralizing sentimentality sanctified the nuclear family.
- 74 Huldén, *Carl Michael Bellman*.
- 75 By my definition, *Fredman's Epistles* embody romantic mating ideology, but their mix of classicist form and pre-Romantic style makes me consider it a proto-Romantic artwork; Lönnroth, *Ljuva karneval!*, 299.
- 76 Linder, *Vår försummade Bellman*.
- 77 To explain the use of farce to promote libertine mating practices, James Turner reverses Karl Marx's famous aphorism regarding historical entities appearing two times, "the first as tragedy, then as farce." Turner writes that "world-changing ideas make their first appearance as farce." Women's sexual agency was so "unthinkable as a serious alternative" that it could only be promoted through the absurd; Turner, *Libertines and Radicals*, 274.
- 78 Huldén, *Carl Michael Bellman*, 104.
- 79 John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader & Dyer, 1869).
- 80 Anne K. Mellor, *Romanticism & Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 25–7.
- 81 Gustaf Ljunggren, *Bellman och Fredmans epistlar: En studie* (Lund: Berlings förlag, 1867).
- 82 Mellor, *Romanticism & Gender*, 28.
- 83 Gustafsson, "Venus jag följer."
- 84 Thorén, "Fredmans religion."
- 85 Victor Svanberg, "Stockholms förfall och Bellman," in Lars-Göran Eriksson, ed., *Kring Bellman* (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 1964), 32–6.
- 86 Kjellén, *Bellman som bohem och parodiker*; Linder, *Vår försummade Bellman*.

6 Perils of Romantic Love

Dark Triad Seducers in *The Magic Goblet* (1841)

In the early 1800s, there were various Romantic moralities in circulation, but the era's most influential creeds promoted an ideal that was unattainable for the vast majority of men. The quintessential hero in romance novels was a man so superiorly attractive that women could hardly resist him. The challenge for the female protagonist was to figure out how to tame such a compelling specimen and make him hers for life. Whether her mate value could match his needed not be of primary importance. According to many versions of Romantic ideology, pair-bonds of true love are underpinned by having made-for-each-other souls, meaning that perhaps any woman could be the right one for a highly arousing man. For he had to be highly arousing; that is how the woman knew her love to be real. In *The Magic Goblet* (*Kyrkoinvingningen i Hammarby*, 1840–1841), Emilie Flygare-Carlén presents to her readers such a man, one who is an expert at triggering women's attraction systems. The novelist does so not to entice women to pursue the highest-value men but to warn against how poor of a guidance we can derive from emotions of lust and love when we seek someone with whom to pair-bond.

With finesse and cold calculation, Rudolph Seiler presents himself as the ideal man.¹ The Norwegian architect has a beautiful, athletic exterior and a personality that captures everyone. Young women, and their mothers, become weak in the knees. Men offer him their best beer. When Seiler stands next to a woman's fiancé, she finds her man to be “small and insignificant” (32).² By the late-Romantic 1840s, such male characters had long enthralled female readers across the West. Romance novels let them fantasize of highly arousing men and, perhaps, gain insights into how to catch someone like Seiler—not for mere copulation but for lifelong marriage.

It is not coincidental that the objects of desire in these books are quite similar. Like all romance heroes, Seiler “is a reflection of female long-term mate preferences.”³ One function of fiction is to help us think more clearly around challenges humans always have faced, such as finding a mate. Female partner preferences favor men with good economic prospects, high

status, dependability, a willingness to invest in children, physical height and strength, facial symmetry and masculinity, and more.⁴ Upon first glance, Seiler seems to tick all the boxes—what more could women want? First, women would want more high-value men. In Chapter 1, I mentioned that polygyny has a math problem. So has monogamy under a romantic regime. There simply are not enough men who are capable of arousing the strongest attraction, especially in the context of brief courtship encounters.⁵ Second, women would want to improve their theory of mind to understand what drives certain types of men with exceptional mating appeal.

For as long as organisms have sexually reproduced, there has been an evolutionary arms race between males seeking access to female sexuality and females seeking only to mate with the most suitable males. Within evolutionary psychology, *sexual conflict theory* accounts for how men and women are incentivized to deceive each other as a result of having conflicting interests.⁶ *Dark Triad traits* are hypothesized to help men get ahead.⁷ A combination of moderately antisocial traits—somewhat elevated levels of narcissism, Machiavellianism, and psychopathy—appears to mostly provide adaptive advantages. The resulting social dominance, manipulative mastery, and emotional callousness let such men exploit female preferences in a manner to which especially young women are vulnerable.⁸ Research shows that Dark Triad men—who typically display entitlement, a glib social charm, and impulsivity—are perceived to be more attractive, which results in them having more partners.⁹ Such men were probably less effective in the premodern world of low mobility and arranged marriages, as communities grew wise to their deception. After the Second Sexual Revolution, Dark Triad seducers entered a golden age.

In *The Magic Goblet*, Flygare-Carlén makes it her mission to reveal the intricacies of such men. She does this with insight and originality. Many romances warned against libertine seducers and other dark Byronic hero-villains.¹⁰ Seiler, however, is not a short-term-oriented Don Juan type. He seeks to fully possess women through romantic manipulation—that is, to forge a pair-bond that offers him the strongest emotional reward—for then to move on to the next woman once emotions subside. He is as blinded—and victimized—by Romantic ideology as the novel's main female characters. Flygare-Carlén villainizes not certain men but her era's mating morality, which idealized that mate choice should be guided by strong affect. One function of courtly love's sanctification of emotion had been to convince superior men to settle for lifelong monogamy. Romantic love tried to convince all men—and women—to only have matrimonial sex. Both ideologies strategically portrayed emotions as truth. Flygare-Carlén builds a thematic argument for how a greater reliance on reason would be a superior strategy for the socially subjugated women of the nineteenth century.

It is not obvious that reason should have to guide our mating efforts. Mammalian emotions evolved to motivate choices that, generally, lead to adaptive outcomes.¹¹ Unfortunately, emotions do not adapt quickly enough to keep up with rapidly changing human environments. I mentioned in the past chapter that the modern world's mating regime of individual choice seems to have created a mismatch for both male and female mating psychologies, the former of which I will examine in Chapter 10. Having evolved under regimes of parental choice, female *Homo sapiens* seem not to have developed sufficient countermeasures against men who express dishonest mating intentions.¹² Leif Kennair and Robert Biegler hypothesize that women also evolved an overly strong attraction to men with good genes to provide a counterweight to parental choice, which devalued good looks and other proxies for genetic value.¹³ *Genetic conflict theory* builds on the fact that a woman and her parents do not have the same stake in her offspring's genes. Grandparents only pass on 25% of their genes, while mothers pass on 50%. From an evolutionary perspective, the senior generation is only half as incentivized to prioritize good genes. Moreover, if the woman breeds with an attractive man who abandons her, her parents may have to step in with resources. Due to this perennial conflict, and since parents have had such a strong say in mate selection, female psychology may have evolved to overly emphasize good genes to make up for the parental overemphasis on *investment traits*, that is, resources and traits that make a man likely to be a good long-term partner and a boon to in-laws.

Flygare-Carlén intuited that female emotions do not provide sufficiently reliable guidance in mating markets,¹⁴ especially under a romantic regime. *The Magic Goblet* ends by forging a pair-bond of reason, although not of the companionate type. Flygare-Carlén does not compromise on individual choice. She clearly condemns parental choice by letting such practices lead to the protagonist's death. Women should select their own partner, but being so dependent on their husband's provisioning, Flygare-Carlén encourages women to bond with a certain type of well-adapted, low-arousal man. The mating morality she promotes is a step toward the pragmatic, gender-equal ideology of confluent love but stops far short. As long as women are hindered from providing for themselves, Flygare-Carlén is not willing to support notions of free love or divorce once emotions subside. With *The Magic Goblet*, she rejects the ideals that had been promoted by Carl Almqvist's *Sara Videbeck (Det går an, 1839)*.¹⁵ This astoundingly controversial novel brought to Scandinavia the Western debate on romantic versus confluent love. Flygare-Carlén's rejection of confluent love made it appear to many twentieth-century literary scholars as if she had been on the wrong side of history, that she was inexcusably conservative and against gender equality. My evolutionary criticism of *The Magic Goblet* helps us discern why a novelist so concerned with female empowerment

did not, in her nineteenth-century context, support equal roles for men and women. I argue that her insights into the shortcomings of human mating emotions have only become more relevant after the Third Sexual Revolution.

Seeing into the Deepest Parts of the Soul

Flygare-Carlén leans into genre tropes as she introduces us to Alfhild, her romantically inclined protagonist, who is about to be swept off her feet. As was common for heroines in Gothic romances, Alfhild lacks female support, having grown up without a mother.¹⁶ When this daughter of a provost in a Swedish village breaks a cursed goblet,¹⁷ a fanciful story is set in motion, one whose underlying Gothic kin revenge plot felt as forced to contemporary critics as it does to modern readers.¹⁸ Once Flygare-Carlén has aligned her story with genre conventions, she plays out a more credible love drama centering on Seiler, the architect who arrives to build a new church. He and Alfhild fall in love, but Seiler has told no one about his arranged marriage in Norway to a wife he does not love but who secretly loves him.¹⁹

Individual choice empowers women—a fact that Flygare-Carlén extolls—but marginalizes average and low-value men, an externality she portrays to harm also women. She warns against modernity's stratified mating markets through juxtaposing Seiler with the average Bloom and the young count Albano, who is ugly and ill. Albano is about to marry Thelma, an impoverished noblewoman. Thelma falls in love with Seiler and thinks he returns her feelings. Seiler discusses with his friend Bloom whether divorce could be acceptable for a man in an arranged marriage who wants to remarry for love. Their conversation engages the *Sara Videbeck* debate that had raged while *The Magic Goblet* was being written.²⁰ Almqvist's novel promoted the ideal that women should be men's sexual, economical, and social equals. Flygare-Carlén was part of an elite literary circle, several of whose members wrote counterworks to *Sara Videbeck*. Maria Löfgren sums up how male contributors to this debate were mostly intrigued by Almqvist's call for "free love," that is, uncommitted copulation and serial monogamy. Female contributors, to a greater extent, worried about how women were more vulnerable to pregnancies and breakups. The current marriage institution was bad, they thought, but free love sounded worse.²¹

Seiler voices a third position: loveless marriages should lead to divorce, and wives in such arrangements should be viewed as men's equals. In love marriages, the woman should submit in a complementary way, as when love makes a man and woman merge, it is "natural" for the man to lead. Seiler uses this philosophy of love to justify leaving his wife to marry Alfhild. As the story builds toward its climax, Flygare-Carlén develops a case for how neither the romantic utopia of lifelong passion

nor the confluent utopia of equality and freedom are fit for the reality of nineteenth-century women. Her female ideal is Maria, the wife Seiler leaves. After the divorce, she builds for herself an autonomous position and starts relying on reason. Bloom remains her close friend but seems not to disclose his love for her until after her divorce is final. The more romantically obsessed characters perish. Being driven to jealousy by Seiler, count Albano murders Thelma and dies. Alfhild waits three years for Seiler's divorce but dies of grief when her father decides that she instead must marry the new count's heir. Heartbroken, Seiler dies too. In the resolution scene, Maria and whom critics agree is Bloom, along with their three-year-old son, visit Seiler and Alfhild's grave. Bloom casts the final verdict on Seiler's Romantic utopia: "Both could not have become so happy here below as they are now" (354).

Contemporary critics mostly read *The Magic Goblet* to be a rather conventional novel—quite entertaining and with good morals. Only a few noticed that Flygare-Carlén's treatment of Seiler represented something different, that her portrayal of him and his lovers had an unusual depth, an uncomfortable one. *North American Review* writes that the story is "a phantasmagoria of unmixed and unaccountable evil." To condemn the narrative, the anonymous reviewer points to a few of Seiler's most narcissistic and psychopathic actions. The fact that the women continue to love Seiler, even after seeing through his rampant selfishness, makes for an exceptionally "dangerous lesson."²² Dark Triad traits are a twenty-first-century concept, but several reviewers attest to folk psychology insights into the workings of such men. *Svenska Biet* finds Seiler's antisocial behavior to have religious depth, to be of the kind that makes everyone unhappy, creating a hell on earth. The reviewer concludes that the main theme engages the male selfishness that consumes everything it desires. August Blanche writes that there exist many persons like Seiler, a fact that makes Flygare-Carlén's credible characterization an incisive attack on men. In the *Sara Videbeck* debate, Blanche had written that confluent love would make all women legal prey to men's egotism. He finds it convincing how Seiler was "a combination of the deepest emotions and the coarsest egotism, the most masculine strength and the most unleashed passions."²³

Later scholarship praises Flygare-Carlén's psychological insights. Harald Svanberg writes that she is the Swedish author most inspired by reality, as the rich and tragic life she had lived prior to becoming an author allowed her to describe life with "almost scientific accuracy even in her most romantic novels." While her literary competitors had been less willing to delve into the baseness of evil, Svanberg finds that the ways in which Flygare-Carlén portrays the lower aspects of human nature point to naturalism and Strindberg. He writes that she had "an eye for seeing into the deepest parts of the soul."²⁴

Flygare-Carlén wrote over 20 novels, several of which remained popular at home and abroad until World War II. Literary historians turned on her from 1930.²⁵ They conclude that her prose is too flowery, her art too business-minded, and her mind too dull. Her success is attributed to her looks, charm, and the men who purportedly helped her write.²⁶ Alf Kjellén wrote the twentieth-century standard work on Flygare-Carlén's literature. He finds *The Magic Goblet* to be more about suffering than emancipation. He suggests that the author's focus on overwhelming passion stems from her private life, as she according to rumors had been unable to resist men.²⁷ Similar sexist devaluation marks most Flygare-Carlén scholarship from the 1930s to the 1980s.²⁸

Later scholarship takes her work more seriously. Some critics recognize that she was a feminist—that is, striving for female empowerment—but without moving beyond the complementary ideal. Yvonne Leffler and Ebba Witt-Brattström argue that while Flygare-Carlén wrote in commercial formats, she is innovative in terms of morality.²⁹ They write that in her early novels, to which *The Magic Goblet* belongs, she connects modernity to male egotism—a phenomenon I would explain as men's adaptation to the increased intramale competition after the West's transition to individual choice. Leffler and Witt-Brattström write that men's more competitive mating behavior required that also women change their outlook and behaviors, a requirement Flygare-Carlén explores through characters like Maria, Seiler's ex-wife. Through this exploration, Löfgren finds the author to undermine romantic love for two reasons: women's subjugated position and the proclivities of a certain type of man. Löfgren identifies Seiler to be a Don Juan-like character, "although not as one-sidedly focused on the lust of the flesh," yet his ideology of love still harms women.³⁰

I add to this body of criticism by suggesting specifics for what Löfgren refers to as "a certain type of man."³¹ What she calls ideology, I believe, is more productively understood as psychology. Seiler offers a coherent ideological justification for why he should romantically possess women, but this narrative is so transparently selfish that his friend Bloom rejects it out of hand. To understand Seiler's actions, we must understand his dark traits. I apply the Dark Triad framework in my analysis of how Flygare-Carlén constructs Seiler's psyche and his surroundings' responses to him. In the past two decades, this and related psychological theories of personality have proved themselves to have considerable explicatory power, also with regard to literature.³² Flygare-Carlén engages in a perpetual challenge. Dark Triad genes being so frequent suggests that a certain level of anti-social behavior provides adaptive advantages in most environments. She makes it her main concern, I argue, to realistically portray a man with such traits. She does this to warn women against similar men but more

importantly to undermine the Romantic belief in the wisdom of emotions through staging how thoroughly our feelings can be manipulated.

Making Marginalized Men Murderous

Seiler has learned to make it seem effortless to convey a great first impression.³³ Alfhild is at first unable to decide whether he is “handsome or ill-favored,”

but when he stood in the room, and bowed with the ease and winning manner of a polished man of the world, and asked to be allowed to share their home, then light sprung up in Alfhild’s soul, and she was astonished not to have seen at the first glance that the architect was the most beautiful man she had ever beheld.

(25)

Her father offers Seiler a pipe and his good beer, hoping they will get along. The young man’s conversational skills are impeccable. Only uncle Sebastian, Alfhild’s main ally and the novel’s moral center, is wise to men like Seiler. Flygare-Carlén conveys Seiler’s falseness through how he treats the provost’s servants. Such underlings are “unfriendly ghosts” whom he manipulates and demeans. Seiler is torn by conflicting impulses and uses ideology to justify his own selfish desires. Meeting the attractive Alfhild made him hunger for a new woman, which he portrays as noble feelings of love but also what complicates his life. He pleads, “Why do I hasten restlessly onward? Why do I not stop at the goal already found in my bleak native mountains, which promises quiet and repose?” (27). His answer to why he cannot be content with his current wife is ideological, as he feels justified in pursuing Alfhild since she offers him the strongest affective reward; thus, she must be his true love: “By heaven! It is she! It can be no one else!” (28).

Seiler stages himself next to Albano so that the count appears “small and insignificant” (32). Thelma admires Seiler’s strength and stature, as he is the most beautiful and bold man she has seen, with irresistible power over her. Her unattractive husband-to-be has many good qualities, she reminds herself, but those were “incapable of reconciling her to the want of a beautiful exterior” (33). Flygare-Carlén portrays women’s mate preferences to be fairly uniform. Even Albano’s mother “found herself greatly discomposed [by] the fascinating, polished stranger [to whom] she wished to show all possible attention.” Thelma seems aware of, and attracted to, Seiler’s dark sides, finding in his smile and eyes “something of the joy one imputes to a demon when he thinks he has allured an innocent soul into the snare” (34). This insight does not diminish her attraction.³⁴ Even the

bishop had fallen for Seiler's glib charm. Flygare-Carlén emphasizes how deliberate his sociality is, how he "saw very well the advantage which he gained every minute, and endeavored to increase it by new turns of conversation" (35).

Only count Albano remains cold toward this bourgeois upstart. Under the companionate regime, marrying a nobleman was about as good as a woman could do. Romantic love made a man's ability to arouse emotion the stronger currency. Flygare-Carlén conveys how painful this can be for unattractive men, painting Albano's face with "displeasure, pain, and chagrin" (36). She argues against universal ideology. A man's philosophy of love, as well as his strategies and psychology, are influenced by his mate value. Albano's low value motivates him to claim that his heart can only love one woman. By contrast, his father and grandfather had been attractive men who pursued half a dozen women at a time. Albano wants women not to speak against him. His father prefers women to speak their minds, so that they are true to their nature. Similar juxtapositions between the views of low- and high-value men continue through the novel.

Flygare-Carlén portrays the ideology of romantic love to offer poor guidance for average and unattractive men, as both Albano and Bloom must hide their romantic feelings. Thelma's emotions suggest that the sanctification of strong love primarily benefits attractive men. She confides to Alfhild that what she detests most about Albano is that "he loves me with so much fervor"; even half would be too much (134). Attracted to Romantic beliefs, Albano weeps for not being able to passionately proclaim his love to Thelma. He accuses her, "You hate me, because I am ugly and mishappen, and yet dare to have a heart" (77). Bitter, he looks forward to their wedding night when, finally, he will be allowed to force her into submission, by which he means to rape her. As he waits for the wedding, he warns her against giving in to her attraction to Seiler:

Take care! I can be as kind as a lamb toward you; but do not provoke me, for then the lamb might change into a tiger, that suddenly devours his mistress, who reaches to him with her white hands a few crumbs from a table where others have already reveled their full.

(154)

The fact that Albano ends up killing Thelma and himself attests to the destructive potential of men who are marginalized in mating markets. Flygare-Carlén's Gothic romance can be read as an insightful contribution to the twenty-first-century debate on incels, the lowest-value men who are excluded from mating.³⁵ In the 2010s, self-identifying incels killed over 50 people in the West.³⁶ Through count Albano, Flygare-Carlén credibly portrays the psychological mechanisms that can make such men

murderous. Through Seiler, she portrays how winners on the same market are rewarded for not suppressing Dark Triad traits. In contrast to Albano and Bloom, Seiler insists on his right to let his actions be dictated by emotion, as self-restraint “would be unnatural with a character like mine; and every digression from the eternal laws of nature carries with it punishment to the transgressor” (55). He claims that his emotions offer truth, as “we have a judge within us which never leads us astray” (107).

To conquer Alfhild, Seiler continues his Machiavellian manipulation of those who might stand in his way. He listens with feigned interest as the provost speaks of politics and philosophy. Seiler “made it his particular task to study the peculiarities of his host, and to accommodate himself to them. He took pains to be as fascinating and interesting as possible” (60). Even uncle Sebastian finally warms to him “in consequence of his pleasing and affable manners” (66). With Alfhild’s protectors pacified, Flygare-Carlén reveals more of Seiler’s Dark Triad personality. When he receives a letter from his wife, Alfhild becomes suspicious of its female handwriting. Seiler threatens her with a deep voice, demanding her unquestioning trust—or he will thrust her from his heart. He verbalizes his love for her for the first time, not out of sincerity but to reward her after making her swear rather to “die than give up your faith in the honesty of my heart.” His callous manipulation makes Alfhild feel alienated from her own emotions. She weeps herself tired, having been “initiated into the first elements of the infinitely long catechism of love” (70).

Löfgren reads this use of “catechism” to engage how, during the Romantic Century, love could be seen as turning into a new religion.³⁷ The modern novel became churches of love, spreading competing gospels—different creeds of romantic ideology. *The Magic Goblet’s* actual church, for which Seiler is the architect, can be seen as the temple of his distinct understanding of love. He describes his pursuit of Alfhild as his life’s “work, the completion of which will be attended with peace and blessing” (89). I interpret the novel’s thematic question to be whether a functional society can be built on Seiler’s understanding of love as a passion that should dictate people’s actions. If he can forge a commendable pair-bond with Alfhild, his catechism of love should be viewed as true. Bloom is the first to understand that Seiler’s “work” is primarily about justifying extreme selfishness. Gradually, the Swedish community also sees through Seiler, once the accumulation of his manipulative actions speaks louder than his glib charm.

Psychopathic Spirits and Machiavellian Humor

Flygare-Carlén introduces Bloom, the purportedly average man, as being of middle height with a pale countenance. He “could not properly be called ill-looking, though he was far from being handsome” (87). His strengths,

however, prove to be considerable. His short-term mate value may be low, but as a long-term partner, he fulfills many female mate preferences. Bloom is firm, earnest, gentle, and practiced in self-control. As the novel progresses, he comes across as a masculine provider and protector—but only after being given ample time to display his underlying qualities. Rather than living up to the Romantic ideal of being immediately arousing, Bloom selflessly works for the good of Maria. He is appalled by Seiler's callousness toward her suffering.

Hearing of Seiler's plans for turning Alfhild into his submissive beloved, Bloom "regarded him with that compassion which we bestow upon a blind man, who at clear daylight seems to grope in the dark." If Seiler insists on defining both love and Alfhild's role as a woman, he would make her a puppet, "which every second asks whether you grant it permission to exist. It is abominable, Seiler, to see a man whose selfishness oversteps all limits of reason." Seiler's levity "is so much beyond all measure, that you overlook the simplest facts that form a glaring contrast to your assertion . . . Your ingratitude, your hardness of heart and selfishness are unparalleled!" (95). Seiler may give an immediate impression of having exceptional mate value, but Bloom reveals how he manipulates his surroundings to achieve this. Bloom may be average in looks, yet his firm morality and self-sacrificial character make him an exceptional catch as a husband.

This is of meager solace in Flygare-Carlén's Romantic environment, as Bloom also must struggle with being romantically invisible in the shade cast by Seiler. In spite of her husband's emotional abuse and cold-heartedness, Maria still loves him, making "a piercing pain [shoot] through Bloom's heart" (151). While Albano tortures Thelma with outbursts of bitter insecurity, Bloom only expresses violent emotion when he is alone. He suffers years of romantic invisibility, like when Maria claims that he is "a happy man not to know what it is to love, to love forever—and without hope" (185). Only toward the end of the novel can she free herself emotionally from Seiler. Thelma, too, is unwilling to let reason override the impulses from her attraction systems. When she learns of Seiler's secret marriage, she wonders if he is "a villain, an abominable despicable man, who made use of his beautiful figure, and his captivating, dangerous manner, to entice young, inexperienced girls into his snare." She answers,

No, no, that was not possible! Those large, black, sparkling eyes did not lie with every glance they sent—and those lips, that could smile like no other, certainly did not open to mock what is best and noblest in this world.

(159)

When Alfhild acts independently, refusing to commit to marriage before Seiler's divorce is final, his social mask begins disintegrating. Typical of

Dark Triad men, he feels entitled to what he desires and acts impulsively when denied. The provost is surprised to discover that “the calm and smooth appearance of this man conceals passions which the love of no woman is able to soften, or govern” (170). He suspects that if Seiler is driven to divorce his wife, he would also come to divorce Alfhild. Having seen Seiler’s true colors, uncle Sebastian is no longer willing to entrust him with Alfhild’s happiness. He warns Alfhild that “this man is a monster that would at last devour you if you should fall into his claws” (203). Albano’s mother now sees Seiler as someone who is, “in spite of his assumed and well-supported seriousness, a very frivolous person, who likes to pluck roses wherever they grow” (216).

The ensuing tragedies are contributed to by Alfhild and Thelma’s unwillingness to let reason override attraction. Even after Seiler has lost his ability to hide his Dark Triad traits, the two women cling to their feelings of love. Löfgren writes that female subjugation made love the only promoted venue of self-realization for nineteenth-century women, at least for those of the higher classes. Without their love for Seiler, Alfhild and Thelma would disappear—existentially. They were meant to become whole through merging with their true beloved. Accepting that his love was not true, or mostly exploitative, would deprive them of the opportunity for self-realization that modernity sanctified. They are given every chance to condemn Seiler’s actions and to break with him, but both continue to be forgiving. Women must keep sacrificing to exist within the metanarrative of romantic love,³⁸ writes Löfgren, as being a man’s saving angel is their highest calling.³⁹ Seiler exploits even this when he self-servingly drops his Dark Triad mask for both Thelma and Alfhild.

Before Thelma’s death, Seiler had told her the truth about him deceiving her, expressing this purportedly noble revelation with narcissistic grandeur: “I have condemned myself to the humiliating punishment to show myself to you without that false shining mask.” He asks understanding for “to what a fantastic mind, like my own, can be brought when fate seems to collude an alliance with its wild fancies” (235). He ascribes partial blame to his Dark Triad traits and Romantic ideology for propelling Thelma toward death. Yet he forgives himself when seeing her corpse, concluding that “she would rather have *died* near my heart than have *lived* near his”—which is one of the narcissistic highpoints to which *North American Review* reacted so strongly.

Alfhild falls for a similar strategy when she visits Seiler in prison after he is wrongly arrested for Thelma’s murder. Having learned that also Thelma loved Seiler, Alfhild swears herself to him in spite of his divorce not being finalized. Flygare-Carlén seems to further push her case for how women are attracted to the same men, as competition only makes Alfhild’s heart grow fonder. Seiler responds by admitting to how he had manipulated Thelma’s

feelings, using means “which the spirits of hell insinuated to me.” He made Albano like and hate him alternately “as my fiendish humor impelled me.” The fact that he gave in to such psychopathic “spirits” and Machiavellian “humor” he blames on Alfhild and her father, since they had refused to discuss marriage until after his divorce. Not getting his will had offended him: “Then a chill came over my heart, though a fire burned there which incessantly consumed its noblest feelings” (256). Alfhild rewards his revelation with uncritical commitment.

Even Maria attempts to fill the role as his saving angel. She offers to care for him in prison, but he is too proud to accept help from the wife he rejected. “Perhaps from cold selfishness,” he admits. After the prison visit, Maria must spend the night at a dodgy inn with threatening men. When Bloom shows up to protect her as a true masculine hero, this becomes her turning point. She has established herself as an independent woman, but now she finally realizes that she also needs a man like Bloom to complement her:

I give you a sacred promise, never again to undertake anything without your advice . . . I should hardly have lived to see the morning if you had not come to take me away . . . I have seen Seiler for the last time.

(303)

Löfgren reads Maria’s transformation to represent Flygare-Carlén’s solution to the era’s debate on mating ideology.⁴⁰ Maria establishes herself as a whole person before she remarries, so that she is not dependent on a man for identity and self-realization. Seiler recognized this change in her when she visited him in prison, that “her strength and appearance on this occasion proves that she has a soul that is sufficient for itself” (296). Romantic ideology had convinced Alfhild and Thelma that their souls needed to merge, a belief that sends them toward death. Emotion blinded them to the unwisdom of competing for—and subjugating themselves to—men who arouse the strongest attraction. Through Maria, Flygare-Carlén stages how a greater reliance on reason can empower women. No longer looking for a man to complete her, but merely complement her, Maria sees the long-term value that low-arousal Bloom offers. They can bond as equals, even if society subjugates women. Flygare-Carlén gives every impression of wanting women to fully be men’s equals but sees no opportunity for that in her own era. She intuits how the freedoms of confluent love at this time would have been similarly harmful to women as the equality offered by libertine love had been almost a century earlier. Her best advice is therefore that women should marry reasonable, liberal men like Bloom to create for themselves a freer role within the marriage.⁴¹

Seiler Fulfills His Romantic Utopia

The novel ends by pointing to the impossibility of ridding society of Dark Triad seducers, whether they are motivated by sexual conquering like Don Juan or romantic possession like Seiler. We can also not expect individual women to resist their allure, so our best bet is to embrace an ideology of love that is more focused on reason. Romantic delusions send Alfild to her demise. She is convinced that her love will tame Seiler, turning him into “a calm, rational, and true man.” All she must do is “subdue the impetuosity and fire of his temperament, and the restlessness of his soul” (315). Uncle Sebastian believes that the more likely outcome is for Seiler to abandon also her, as her emotions are not a result of true love but “his eloquent tongue” (316).

Alfild’s fate is sealed when she is targeted by a second Dark Triad seducer: Linus, who falls for her since she is the only woman impervious to his charm—as a consequence of her waiting for Seiler to return. The young officer matches Seiler’s skills with regard to arousing women and impressing men. Seiler hears that Linus is “a real heart-breaker” but fears not the competition, as “my pride, or if you please, my self-love, prevents me from believing that a woman that gives me her love could sigh for any other man” (335). Linus outmaneuvers Seiler through manipulation so effective that he narcissistically concludes that “I should have made the best diplomat that ever received a mission to a foreign court” (337). He convinces the new count’s assistant that he has become a better man and that domestic life would be good for him. The count appoints him heir and proposes on his behalf. The provost is too blinded by the opportunity to have his daughter marry into nobility to apply the lesson he learned with regard to Seiler to the new Dark Triad romantic. The provost insists that Alfild must marry Linus, a demand that is so unjust that it becomes too painful for her to bear. Parental choice thus causes the protagonist’s death.

Seiler shows up to marry Alfild, only to find her funeral underway in the church he built. He falls into her grave, becoming deadly wounded. With great pathos, he insists on following his beloved. With how credibly Flygare-Carlén has delineated Seiler’s psyche and ideological possession, it seems not out of character when the dying Romantic demands that organ music fill his temple of love. Then,

when the mysterious tones re-echoed in the high vault which he himself had erected, he lifted himself up once more, yet sank back again immediately, and with the conclusion of the grave choral melody his heart had ceased beating.

(353)

Buried with his beloved—guided by the emotions that should have been unable to lead him astray—Seiler fulfills his Romantic utopia. I read this ending as Flygare-Carlén's rejection of her era's hegemonic mating morality. Romantic love sanctified strong emotion to encourage paternal investment.⁴² Such ideology contributed to how, from 1850, illegitimacy began to decline across the West.⁴³ Still, to Flygare-Carlén, promoting emotions as truth was not sustainable. Women would too often be too drawn to certain types of men who would exploit them. Seiler may have convinced himself that Alfhild was his eternal beloved, but to everyone but the couple it seemed obvious that he would lose interest once he had possessed her. This is why Bloom ends the story by stating that Seiler and Alfhild are happier dead than they ever could be in the real world.

Gothic Subversion of the Patriarchy

Flygare-Carlén's reliance on the Gothic romance and other popular genres has blinded many critics to her feminist credentials and the value of her literature. Eva Borgström concludes that the commercially successful novelist had a conventional view on gender and that her works did not criticize uneven marriages or her era's morals.⁴⁴ As my reading of *The Magic Goblet* attested, Flygare-Carlén was deeply concerned with women's plight and explored options for more suitable marriages and morals. She was less idealistic than many contemporary novelists, being "far more concerned in her novels with what happens than with what should happen."⁴⁵ Having lost a husband and a fiancé, and several children, perhaps contributed to her pragmatism. She had experience with being on her own and did not think women could fill the same roles as men—yet—so she advocated a more gradual reform within the complementary regime. Löfgren emphasizes that Flygare-Carlén, although she was no radical, sought to widen the frame for women's freedom and self-development. As her career as a novelist progressed, her female protagonists grew stronger and more independent.⁴⁶

Gothic romances like *The Magic Goblet* can today come across as artistically awkward. The fact that Flygare-Carlén was Sweden's most read and best-paid novelist speaks to her astuteness with regard to format.⁴⁷ Michael Gamer refers to the Gothic as a mediator between art and mass culture.⁴⁸ Writing about gender and mating for diverse audiences with conflicting desires tends to polarize. The Gothic romance allowed authors to use metaphor and exotic environments to make their points more indirectly. Instead of writing of ordinary men who failed with modern mating, Flygare-Carlén could use count Albano. Part of Seiler's darkness of character could be blamed on the cursed goblet. The female Gothic became "a politically subversive genre articulating women's dissatisfactions with

patriarchal structures and offering a coded expression of their fears of entrapment within the domestic and the female body.”⁴⁹

As the Gothic evolved, threats became less diabolical and more rooted in human interiority.⁵⁰ For female readers, a key lesson in theory of mind concerned how to penetrate disguises, to recognize who the true villains were, the “men whose capacity for abuse they did not accurately gauge, and in what psychological labyrinths they lose the way out.”⁵¹ Typically, the villain’s evil originated from tyrannical structures outside of himself. With *The Magic Goblet*, Flygare-Carlén further internalizes the Gothic, making individual pathology—accentuated by social ideology—the object for her warning. With the ending’s carnage, juxtaposed with Maria’s marriage of reason, Flygare-Carlén takes a stand against the dominant creed of romantic love but without becoming backward-looking. She lets uncle Sebastian clarify that it is “most just and best, that marriages are made by affection” not parental choice (348). Importantly, this is not the overwhelming affect portrayed to last a lifetime. In a world of mostly average men, women should choose men who are more like Bloom instead of falling for men like Seiler. Such an advocacy for low-arousal, liberal men was key to Flygare-Carlén’s ideology of love, as she let similar male characters help emancipate women in several novels.⁵² In the two final chapters, I investigate how those modern mating dynamics—against which Flygare-Carlén warns—in our present era drive a far stronger stratification among men and an emphasis on immediate attraction that contribute to increasing singledom and low fertility.⁵³

After the *Sara Videbeck* debate, the Scandinavian discussion around confluent love subsided, but it made a grand reentry with Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1879). Nora leaving her husband and children to pursue equality and self-realization became the inflection point for the Modern Breakthrough, a literary movement that developed an ideological foundation for confluent love based on an understanding of humans as evolved animals. Flygare-Carlén had asked which philosophy of love best served contemporary women. The authors of the Modern Breakthrough were more focused on the future, envisioning how humans might mate once the modern environment permitted that men and women to a greater extent pursue short- and long-term mating driven by their natural impulses. They asked what a “true marriage” could entail and how “free love” might manifest itself.

Notes

- 1 I use character names from the English translation.
- 2 English translation from Flygare-Carlén, *The Magic Goblet*; hereafter, only page numbers are in parenthesis.

- 3 Catherine Salmon, "What do Romance Novels, Pro Wrestling, and Mack Bolan Have in Common? Consilience and the Pop Culture of Storytelling," in Joseph Carroll, Dan P. McAdams, and Edward O. Wilson, eds., *Darwin's Bridge: Uniting the Humanities & Science* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 167–82, 169.
- 4 Salmon, "What do Romance Novels"; Schmitt, "Fundamental Strategies of Human Mating."
- 5 Flygare-Carlén made it one of the main themes of her oeuvre to engage in the consequences of intrafemale competition. Harald Svanberg notes that a particular psychological problem marks her works: "one man being torn between two women"; Harald Svanberg, *Emilie Flygare-Carlén: En studie* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 1912), 21.
- 6 Buss, "Sexual Conflict in Human Mating."
- 7 Dark Triad traits can offer benefits in a line of social competitions, of which mating is the most foundational. Such traits can also help women get ahead, but they are less relevant with regard to women's short-term mating strategies.
- 8 Corinne Qureshi, Elizabeth Harris, and Breanna E. Atkinson, "Relationships between Age of Females and Attraction to the Dark Triad Personality," *Personality and Individual Differences* 95 (2016): 200–3.
- 9 Carter et al., "The Dark Triad Personality"; Peter K. Jonason, Minna Lyons, and Alyson Blanchard, "Birds of a 'Bad' Feather Flock Together: The Dark Triad and Mate Choice," *Personality and Individual Differences* 78 (2015): 34–8.
- 10 The Byronic hero was named after the English Romantic poet Lord Byron. Such male romance characters are moody, dark, and deeply emotional.
- 11 Patrick K. Durkee, Aaron W. Lukaszewski, and David M. Buss, "Pride and Shame: Key Components of a Culturally Universal Status Management System," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 40.5 (2019): 470–8.
- 12 Apostolou, *Sexual Selection in Homo Sapiens*; Goetz et al., "Evolutionary Mismatch in Mating."
- 13 Leif E. O. Kennair and Robert Biegler, "Conflicting Tastes: Conflict between Female Family Members in Choice of Romantic Partners," in Maryanne L. Fisher, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Women and Competition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 529–52; Robert Biegler and Leif E. O. Kennair, "Sisterly Love: Within-Generation Differences in Ideal Partner for Sister and Self," *Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences* 10.1 (2016): 29–42.
- 14 My use of the term "intuited" for Flygare-Carlén's cognitive processes entails no devaluation of her capacity for reason. In the evolutionary sciences, intuition often is used in contrast with knowledge gained from empirical science. This might sound reductive to humanities scholars, who, in the humanist tradition, view human cognition as a more conscious and reliable process.
- 15 Almqvist, *Det går an*.
- 16 Ann B. Tracy, "Gothic Romance," in Marie Mulvey-Roberts, ed., *The Handbook of the Gothic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 169–73.
- 17 A provost is a Protestant minister. I interpret Alfhild's father to represent companionate love. He is a well-intentioned parent who mortally harms his daughter through his forcing of a husband on her.
- 18 Maria Löfgren, *Emancipationens gränser: Emilie Flygare-Carléns 1840-talsromaner och kvinnans ställning* (Stockholm: Brutus Östlings förlag, 2003).

- 19 With how tragically this arranged marriage ends, Flygare-Carlén takes a strong stand against parental choice and companionate pragmatism; she is a true Romantic, but one more focused on reason than what many others were.
- 20 Monica Lauritzen, *En kvinnas röst: Emilie Flygare-Carléns liv och dikt* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 2007).
- 21 Löfgren, *Emancipationens gränser*.
- 22 North American Review, "Reviewed Work(s): The Magic Goblet, or the Consecration of the Church of Hammarby by Emilie Carlen," *North American Review* 60 (1845): 492–3.
- 23 *Svenska Biet* and August Blanche quoted in Lauritzen, *En kvinnas röst*, 162–3.
- 24 Svanberg, *Emilie Flygare-Carlén*, 14, 18.
- 25 Hansson, *Vem gör litteraturens historia?*; Yvonne Leffler, "The Success of Swedish 19th-Century Women Writers on the French-Speaking Book Market: Fredrika Bremer and Emilie Flygare-Carlén versus C. J. L. Almqvist and Viktor Rydberg," *Nordic Journal of Francophone Studies* 5.1 (2022): 124–36.
- 26 For instance, in Alf Kjellén, *Emilie Flygare-Carlén: En litteraturhistorisk studie* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Boktryckeri, 1932).
- 27 Kjellén, *Emilie Flygare-Carlén*.
- 28 Gunnar Hansson, *Vem gör litteraturens historia?* (Linköping: Universitetet i Linköping, 1990).
- 29 Yvonne Leffler and Ebba Witt-Brattström, "Skräck och skärgård," in Elisabeth Møller Jensen, ed., *Nordisk kvinnolitteraturhistoria* 2 (Höganäs: Wiken, 1993), 261–8.
- 30 Löfgren, *Emancipationens gränser*, 33.
- 31 Löfgren, *Emancipationens gränser*, 29.
- 32 John A. Johnson, "Vampires are Real: An Evolutionary View of the *Twilight* Saga," *The Evolutionary Review: Art, Science, Culture* 2 (2011): 113–8; Daniel J. Kruger, Maryanne Fisher, and Ian Jobling, "Proper and Dark Heroes as Dads and Cads: Alternative Mating Strategies in British Romantic Literature," *Human Nature* 14 (2003): 305–17.
- 33 For an earlier version of this interpretation, see Mads Larsen, "A Pop Literature Theory of Mind of the Romantic Century's Dark Triad Seducers," *Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences* (2024): Online First.
- 34 The fact that the superior men of romance novels often had dark traits speaks to how men with such traits are attractive to many women. This is referred to as *the bad boy paradox*; Buss, *When Men Behave Badly*. To acquire such a mate, the female protagonist must overcome "obstacles to identify, win the heart of, and ultimately have a long-term relationship with the one man who is right for her [often] through the 'taming' of the hero"; Salmon, "What do Romance Novels," 169.
- 35 William Costello et al., "Levels of Well-Being Among Men Who Are Incel (Involuntarily Celibate)," *Evolutionary Psychological Science* 8 (2022): 375–90.
- 36 Blake and Brooks, "Societies Should Not Ignore Their Incel Problem."
- 37 Löfgren, *Emancipationens gränser*.
- 38 A meta-narrative is "an overall account of things that enables people to find belief, pattern, and meaning in their experiences"; <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/metanarrative>. Religions, ideologies, sufficiently comprehensive philosophies, etc., are all meta-narratives.
- 39 Löfgren, *Emancipationens gränser*.
- 40 Löfgren, *Emancipationens gränser*.

- 41 Lauritzen, *En kvinnas röst*.
- 42 I suggest not that this was the conscious intention of all, many, or even some Romantics. As usual, my evolutionary perspective compels me not to ascribe individual intention but to discern a functionalist purpose of a particular ideology. From a humanist perspective, this can come across as reductive.
- 43 Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family*.
- 44 Borgström, "Emilie Flygare-Carlén."
- 45 Alrik Gustafson, *A History of Swedish Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1961), 218.
- 46 Löfgren, *Emancipationens gränser*.
- 47 Yvonne Leffler, "Rosen på Tistelön 1800-talets stora bestseller," in Monica Lauritzen, ed., *En ros, ett år: Artiklar kring Emilie Flygare-Carlén* (Stockholm: Tre Böcker Förlag, 1994), 9–19; Yvonne Leffler, "Svensk 1800-talslitteratur i världen: Det kvinnliga romanundret," *Tidskrift för litteraturvetenskap* 48.1–2 (2018): 7–17.
- 48 Michael Gamer, *Romanticism and the Gothic: Genre, Reception, and Canon Formation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
- 49 Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith, "Introduction: Defining the Female Gothic," in Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith, eds., *The Female Gothic: New Directions* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1–12, 2.
- 50 Helen Stoddart, "The Demonic," in Marie Mulvey-Roberts, ed., *The Handbook of the Gothic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 116–8.
- 51 Tracy, "Gothic Romance," 173.
- 52 Löfgren, *Emancipationens gränser*.
- 53 Fry and Parker, "Rising Share"; Vollset et al., "Fertility"; Robert C. Brooks et al., "Effects of Gender Inequality and Wealth Inequality on Within-Sex Mating Competition under Hypergyny," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 43.6 (2022): 501–9.

7 Exploring Confluent Love

Darwinian Mating in the Modern Breakthrough (1871–1888)

Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) intuited that confluent love was destined to become the mating ideology of the modern individual. In no previous society had people been granted full agency to manage their own short- and long-term mating strategies. But those societies belonged to a world that felt very different from the one that was arising as a consequence of the first industrial revolutions. In the brave, new world that was manifesting itself in Ibsen’s era, so much seemed possible that previously had been inconceivable. Perhaps it was even within our capacity to free women from the yoke of patriarchal subjugation. To many people, such a vision sounded like starry-eyed utopianism. But for some moral vanguards, gender equality and “free love” seemed like the natural next steps on the human journey. The lesson from the Second Sexual Revolution had been that sexuality could not be free before women were. Who this New Woman should be remained a mystery, one that storytellers were eager to explore. No one did this more compellingly, or provocatively, than Ibsen when he wrote *A Doll’s House* (*Et dukkehjem*, 1879).

Ibsen’s female protagonist, Nora, had been subjected to conflicting cultural programming. The ethos of modernity conveyed that the Western individual should self-realize.¹ Since the First Sexual Revolution, an evolution toward ever-greater individualism made people feel increasingly independent from kin and family. Alone, the Western individual should step into the world and self-create.² Romantic love, however, told women that their arena for self-realization was not “the world” but the domestic domain, as they could only find purpose through their husbands and children. Such beliefs were adaptive—attested to by the nineteenth century’s population explosion—but increasingly dissatisfying for women drawn to the modern narrative of self-creation through individualistic achievement. The romantic utopia of stay-at-home motherhood did not align with everyone’s desires and aspirations.

When Nora ends *A Doll’s House* by slamming the door on her family, she ameliorates her cognitive dissonance through embracing confluent love.

This mating morality offered women independence, that is, copulation and pair-bonding on equal footing with men; and, in the extension of this—as for Nora when the play ends—also the burden of self-provisioning. The first industrial revolutions were creating a world with increasing opportunities for women to earn salaries sufficient for a one-person household. Such an environment permitted that a man and a woman—instead of merging for life—could pair-bond as autonomous individuals, free to un-bond and seek new mates as their emotions and reason guided them (confluence: come together).³ This was how our forager ancestors had lived—as serial monogamists—before agriculture tied men and women together for life.

To you and me, confluent love probably sounds as obviously right as romantic love did to most of Ibsen's readers—or earlier mating moralities to their contemporaries. Perhaps you and I have more reason to praise our morality since our mating practices align better with those of foragers. Alas, that is not how this works; there exists no paleo diet for mating. Fornicating like foragers might work well in the modern environment, and it may not; it is an empirical question. A morality is under no obligation to promote what feels natural. Quite the contrary, as our moralities are cultural tools for motivating behaviors that benefit our communities, even when our nature compels us to act selfishly.⁴ In this chapter, my investigation of the Modern Breakthrough attests to how the movement's authors were able to untangle *Homo sapiens'* mating nature. You might be impressed by the precision with which they predicted how modern mating would evolve, but they did not uncover an endpoint to which we were inevitably drawn; no such thing ever existed. Confluent love felt right because its tenets align with modern thought and institutions. Ibsen, Skram, Strindberg, and the other contributors appear prescient because they were caught by the same Darwinian wave that influenced other Western communities as they too were negotiating new ways to copulate and pair-bond that were a better fit for their changing world.⁵ The authors of the Modern Breakthrough less predicted and more helped create and disseminate a new morality.

Some of these Scandinavian artists understood our mating impulses, but negotiating how these should be tempered by morality to contribute to a functional social order is always an open-ended process—and a long one at that. Courtly love needed two centuries to culturally reprogram the Norse.⁶ Confluent love—if we count from *Sara Videbeck* to 1968—needed 129 years to convince the Nordics. Such processes of cultural change are often not only about convincing, as the environment needs time to transform so that it can support the desired regime. We first imagine a compelling new world with innovative practices and beliefs, then—through agency and happenstance—eventually bring about the emergence of a world somewhat similar to that which we had imagined.

Unfortunately, what may have appeared near-utopian in our imagination does not solve everything. The new mating morality comes with its own challenges and shortcomings, which motivate us to imagine new solutions, and so forth. In the ever-changing modern world, this has been a continuous process, one that has been more complex than the impression you may get from the typology I offered in Figure I.1. We need not conceptualize the Modern Breakthrough as promoting a transition between two unrelated moralities of love. We could draw longer lines, as these moralities are but heuristic tools meant to help us think more clearly about the past millennium's radical evolution of Western mating. Alternatively, we could use my definition of romantic love as an ideology of individual choice. Confluent love would then be but a new iteration of the ideology that began as libertine love. More than a quarter of a millennium after the Second Sexual Revolution, we still have not conceived of a morality that stabilizes Western mating practices under a regime of individual choice. Instead—as we explored in the Introduction chapter and will return to in the Conclusion—staggering numbers of men and women are withdrawing from short- and long-term mating,⁷ and our nations are headed for a demographic collapse.⁸

Perhaps human mating nature does not lend itself to individual choice, even in the modern environment. It never did in any previous environment.⁹ I have no opinion on whether this could be the case; again, it is an empirical question. It seems fairly certain, however, that Western civilization would rather self-eradicate under the aegis of individual choice than return to a mating regime that imposes upon men and women undesired pair-bonds and reproduction. Individual agency is the West's paramount value—the unintended teleology of the psychological-institutional coevolution that was set in motion by the Church's dissolution of Europe's tribes.¹⁰ We have been so efficiently indoctrinated regarding our mating morality that, for decades, we have preferred to remain silent as, in nation after nation, fertility rates have fallen far below replacement levels. Only the most heterodox of thinkers, like Elon Musk, keep warning that “birth rate collapse is the biggest threat to human civilization.”¹¹ At least until recently, he was taken about as seriously as when he in the 2010s warned against the existential perils of artificial intelligence; hardly anyone wants to engage the threat.

The challenges of AI and low fertility are similar in that no obvious solutions—or even acceptable countermeasures—appear to exist. The Scandinavian experience tells us that gender equality and generous welfare need not encourage baby making. In some regards, such policies pull in the opposite direction.¹² To again permit polygyny could be the most effective means we have at our disposal for boosting fertility.¹³ This is not uplifting, considering how Western cultures would probably be as averse to polygyny

as arranged marriages. Looking back in history for specific measures will likely not work, as I consider a further turning of the individualistic screw more likely than any loosening. The authors of the Modern Breakthrough cultivated this individualistic perspective as they looked into the future—at the cusp of the Second Industrial Revolution¹⁴—to envision how we, their descendants, might mate. They asked what they themselves were drawn to and how the world brought about by their era’s emerging technologies might facilitate the living out of such desires.

We are in a similar position. The Second Industrial Revolution was upending their world, creating social havoc, and making old truths obsolete.¹⁵ We are on the cusp of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Our old truths are losing their ability to unite our communities, a cultural dissolution that is most visible in the United States. Our mating practices seem similarly dysfunctional as those railed against by the authors of the Modern Breakthrough. I have hardly heard a single person speak warmly of Tinder and modern dating. I know men with much success at acquiring short-term mates via apps, but even they are appalled by the dynamics of today’s mating markets. Western women have achieved a unique level of freedom and agency, but many respond by withdrawing from both short- and long-term mating markets.¹⁶ High singledom and plummeting fertility are externalities of a mating regime which is increasingly unable to offer men and women what they want. We should therefore ask ourselves: if a better tomorrow were possible, what would we be drawn to? How might our era’s emerging technologies facilitate that our descendants fulfill their mating desires? It took nearly a century from Georg Brandes’s 1871 call to action, which motivated the Modern Breakthrough, to the Third Sexual Revolution. How long will it take before we unite around a new mating morality?

These might seem like too-large, unanswerable questions. My investigation of the Modern Breakthrough attests to how trying to look into the future need not be a futile exercise. Literature not only helps us delve deeply into human nature to better understand ourselves but also aids the communal process of imagining into being tomorrow’s morality. Such journeys beg boldness; they are not for the conformist or faint at heart. The public condemnation, ridicule, arrests, and book confiscations that the authors of the Modern Breakthrough suffered exemplify how the general public tends to react when their mating morality is challenged. We are not meant to question how our community tells us to copulate and pair-bond. Yet during transitions, we have no choice but to let go of old truths to find better ones, a process that fiction seems to make somewhat more tolerable. As we look for the twenty-first century’s new truths—which may be so different that they at first seem preposterous—we should bear in mind how people reacted to Hans Jæger, “the rabid

dog” of the Kristiania Bohemians.¹⁷ He became Norway’s most infamous man, was locked up, submitted to psych evaluation, and deprived of opportunities to provide for himself after envisioning a social order similar to social democracy, underpinned by confluent love. He even quite accurately assessed how many lifetime sex partners men would want—a number so provokingly high that it motivated strangers to stop and point at Jæger in the street.

The Double Standard

The Romantic Century succeeded with what post-Reformation Puritanism also had achieved: to instill in the public that women only benefitted from marital sex. Women of the late nineteenth century had an additional incentive to live up to expectations of chastity. Economic growth generated an increasing number of middle-class men who could offer a materially comfortable existence for a stay-at-home wife, similar to how the upper classes organized their pair-bonding. To remain eligible for such a marriage, middle-class daughters and other ambitious women had to save themselves for the wedding night—a minor sacrifice if female sexuality were as construed. By contrast, it was widely considered unhealthy for men to go too long without sex. Since it typically took many years to accumulate sufficient resources to afford a middle-class marriage, the cultural compromise was to look the other way if these men had discreet sex with lower-class lovers or prostitutes. Such pragmatism was institutionalized, as regulated prostitution was legalized in Norway in 1868, in Denmark in 1874, and in Sweden in 1875.¹⁸ No such accommodation was offered to those waiting for Mr. Right. This unequal treatment of men’s and women’s sexualities became known as “the double standard,” one of the primary targets of the Modern Breakthrough.

This mating regime, too, had a math problem, or several. Many more women wanted to not work than there were men who could finance the romantic utopia. A skewed sex ratio—in particular in cities—made matters worse. Unlike in antiquity, there were now too few men due to the era’s large-scale emigration being a male-heavy affair. In 1860, Copenhagen’s female surplus was 9%; in 1870, Stockholm’s was 25%; and in 1875, that of Kristiania (now Oslo) was 11%. Romantic ideology did not consider sex ratios; it prescribed that women wait chastely at home for a man with sufficient resources to propose. Submitting to this script often went unrewarded. In Stockholm in 1870, of women aged 25–30 only 27% were married. From 1870 to 1920, 40% of the Swedish capital’s women never became wives.¹⁹ Men lost out too. They may have been allowed to have sex with prostitutes, but marriage could be allusive. Some men did not accumulate enough money to live up to romantic ideals until late in

life, and many never did, as the pursuit of economic success is always a fraught endeavor.

As a result, many men and women spent their 20s, or longer, without the opportunity to start a family—the paramount condition for self-realization, according to romantic ideology. This waiting period was similar to that of the EMP but made less sense for the middle class of the modern era. Since the 1770s, the lower classes had reproduced more effectively than the well-off.²⁰ Middle-class women often had their reproductive period shortened or never entered into one. It became increasingly clear that a regime that relegated many middle-class daughters to lifelong spinsterhood and many sons to years of reproductive inactivity was, in several regards, dysfunctional. Groundbreaking feminist literature, such as Camilla Collett's *The District Governor's Daughters* (*Amtmandens Døttre*, 1854–1855), had portrayed how women suffered and suggested revisions to the existing mating ideology. These early efforts were less effective as they lacked a sufficiently novel perspective, a theoretical innovation that would let them function as what I term cultural dissolvents.²¹ People continued to submit to the romantic regime, thinking it had been prescribed by God, which is a challenging authority to argue against. If men and women were divinely designed for lifelong monogamy, fading love and a desire for extrapair copulation were mere challenges devised to test whether you were fit for paradise in the afterlife.

Charles Darwin offered the evolutionary meta-narrative that would upend the Christian understanding of human nature. *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) described humans as evolved apes, compelling thinkers and artists to, among other things, reimagine morality and mating. In 1871, Georg Brandes—the theorist behind the Modern Breakthrough and its premier literary critic—called out to Scandinavian authors, imploring them to write socially conscious literature that rebelled against tradition. As the 1870s progressed, Darwinism took increasing hold of the Scandinavian public discourse²²; it became the ideological and analytical weapon of the Modern Breakthrough. The literary movement's overarching aim was to develop a new, naturalistic mating ideology.²³ Uncertainty around the implications of Darwin's theory allowed the authors to appropriate it for a range of conflicting agendas. Some resorted to Darwinian window-dressing—topical, superficial references—while others offered penetrative evolutionary analysis that illuminated human universals and educated audiences.

Lust, Love, and Attachment

Jens Peter Jacobsen (1847–1885) was among the first Scandinavians to understand the importance of the theory of evolution.²⁴ In the early 1870s,

the gifted botanist translated Darwin's works into Danish and debuted with the short story "Mogens."²⁵ His approach led one critic to read "Mogens" not as "a love story, but a story about 'mate selection,' analogous to [Darwin's] thesis on 'eroticism in the animal kingdom'."²⁶ In this tale of young lovers who struggle to understand their own mating impulses, Jacobsen dramatizes how human nature and moral expectation clash: "That which was called love, it was the hollowest of all hollow things, it was lust, flaming lust, glimmering lust, smoldering lust, but lust and nothing else."²⁷ The protagonist despises himself for having desires that misalign with romantic ideology:

Passion spoiled everything, and it was very ugly and unhuman. How he hated everything in human nature that was not tender and pure, fine and gentle! He had been subjugated, weighed down, tormented, by this ugly and powerful force; it had lain in his eyes and ears, it had poisoned all his thoughts.²⁸

In *Niels Lyhne* (1880), one of the first truly modern novels,²⁹ Jacobsen turns his focus from sexual desire to the challenges of lifelong monogamy. The eponymous protagonist notes how, after two years of marriage, a couple he knows are no longer bonded by love. Their intense passion has become replaced by "a sweet contempt which day by day lessened in sweetness and became, at last, utterly bitter."³⁰ Niels's father is better at adapting to long-term requirements. After his first year of marital bliss, his feelings change, as he wants to let go of his "plumage of romance [to] settle peacefully." He wishes for their love to become "more like the quiet glow of embers on their bed of ashes, spreading a gentle warmth."³¹ His transformation is illuminated by how biological anthropologist Helen Fisher conceptualizes human mating. She proposes that our relationships are underpinned by three distinct systems: lust, love, and attachment.³² Lust motivates us to copulate, love to pair-bond, and attachment to stay together after lust and love have subsided.

Niels's father is willing to settle for the "gentle warmth" of attachment, but his mother is not. Having grown up on romantic poetry that proselytized lifelong love, she reacts with sorrow when her dopamine levels diminish. Not only does she feel less good, but without the illusion spawned by her love, her husband begins to appear

no whit different from the people she used to live among. She had merely been deceived by the very ordinary fact that his love, for a brief moment, had invested him with a fleeting glamor of soulfulness and exaltation.³³

From my evolutionary perspective, love has two prime functions: (1) to motivate women to have sex also with low-value men and (2) to motivate men and women to cooperate through the pregnancy and their offspring's most vulnerable phase. When their love mechanisms had been triggered, Niels's parents felt strongly attracted to each other and also acted differently, as his father had donned his "plumage of romance." Love deluded Niels's mother into thinking that her husband was an exceptionally good match. Once love was done performing its neural magic—which typically lasts 12–18 months³⁴—she could assess him more soberly, understanding "how great had been her mistake."³⁵ By this time, Niels was growing in her uterus, and his father felt like embracing attachment. The father's adaptation seems aided by how, when men become bonded and settled, their testosterone and stress hormones tend to decrease while estrogen increases. The adaptive upside seems to be that the resulting loss in sexual appetite focuses men on childrearing.³⁶

A main thematic implication of Jacobsen's oeuvre is that human nature aligns poorly with the demands of lifelong monogamy. The romantic myth of everlasting bliss can be adaptive, but a better understanding of our own nature can help us accept those compromises that are necessary for modern relationships to not become festered by contempt and bitterness. As the Modern Breakthrough's first decade came to a close, another author—with ambitions of much grander influence—turned the naturalistic perspective from interiority to social dysfunction.

A True Marriage

Ibsen hugged Brandes so hard when they first met that the critic "could scarcely breathe."³⁷ With his contributions to the Modern Breakthrough, Ibsen would become the father of modern drama and, arguably, history's greatest playwright besides Shakespeare.³⁸ Ibsen bid Brandes an enthusiastic adieu: "You stir up the Danes, I'll stir up the Norwegians."³⁹ He later added that his work would entail a revolution, a "mortal combat between two epochs [because] anything is better than the existing state of affairs."⁴⁰

With Nora's final words, Ibsen challenges audiences and authors to explore how men and women would have to transform themselves so that their "living together could be a true marriage."⁴¹ With *Ghosts* (*Gengangere*, 1881), his most naturalistic play, Ibsen makes infidelity, venereal disease, and incest an integral part of the drama to show the ugliest consequences of romantic morality. Bourgeois values did not only make individuals miserable but poisoned the public sphere and blinded people to the opportunities of a new age. *Ghosts* took modern tragedy in a new direction, as such plays had "dealt mainly with the unhappy consequences of breaking the moral code [while *Ghosts*] deals with the consequences of not breaking it."⁴²

In *The Wild Duck* (*Vildanden*, 1884), young Gregers wants “to establish a true marriage” but admits that he has “hardly seen a single one.”⁴³ A definition is offered, that of “a marriage based on complete trust, one that’s wholehearted and open on both sides [without] secrets [and with] mutual forgiveness of sins.”⁴⁴ This openness toward premarital sex for both sexes can be read as an attack on Ibsen’s longtime rival, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832–1910). Bjørnson had thrown gasoline on the “morality debate” with *A Gauntlet* (*En hanske*, 1883). His solution to the double standard was to demand premarital chastity also from men. The Brandes circle responded with contempt and ridicule. Bjørnson had convinced himself, after reading Darwin, that lust led to cruelty. Alas, Scandinavian men—unless they saved themselves for marriage—risked falling victim to the kind of vanity and lack of moderation that so plagued the French.⁴⁵ Bjørnson’s position was informed by how he sided with Lamarckism, believing that a child would not only inherit its parents’ promiscuity but also their efforts in resisting promiscuity.⁴⁶ His play became a box-office hit, but roaring, gleeful audiences aligned themselves with the drama’s antagonistic forces.⁴⁷ For the era’s Darwinian interpretations, the stage became a testing ground through which audiences firmly rejected propositions of universal chastity.

August Strindberg (1849–1912) accused Bjørnson of writing *A Gauntlet* to win female support: “Be immoral, Bjørnson, like you were in your youth, for the virtue that comes after age 50 is no good for preaching!” He signed his letter, “your former friend.”⁴⁸ Strindberg’s short stories, *Married* (*Giftas*, 1884–1886), laid marriages bare, convincingly, and in all their ugliness. If anyone hoped that there existed a recipe for “true marriage” that could bring domestic salvation, Strindberg’s drama was designed to crush any such hope. At most, a *détente* could be found through which a man and a woman could survive in each other’s long-term company if they “found safety-valves for their temperaments which refused to blend.”⁴⁹

Strindberg, too, infuses his narratives with evolutionary reasoning, questioning the nature of love. “There are materialists who say that there would be no such thing as love if there weren’t two sexes,” offers a lawyer who courts the wealthy protagonist in “A Duel.” They decide to pair-bond not because they are meant for each other but because they have a similarly low mate value based on their looks. “Whenever it is a question of natural selection,” the lawyer explains, “right is on the side of the strong and the beautiful.” This rings somewhat true for short-term mating but not in respect to long-term pair-bonding for a male lawyer and a 20-year-old woman of means in late-1800s Sweden. When the woman expresses that she primarily looks for “kindness,” the lawyer retorts: “Kindness and weakness usually go hand in hand; women admire strength.”⁵⁰

Studies from our present era show that female mate preferences have evolved to value love, kindness, and sincerity above all else in long-term

partners, in particular when such altruism is directed at the woman and her kin.⁵¹ When Darwinism was discussed in the 1880s, its theories tended to be interpreted with a greater focus on brute competition. The remedy for civilization's misalignment with human nature was often claimed to be the era's new doctrines of socialism, anarchism, and other -isms not yet discredited.⁵² In a letter to a friend, Strindberg referred to *Married* as "my whore book," claiming that his upcoming publication was

pure socialism with the most radical women's agenda ever seen! But I blame Ibsen for his fiendish idealism in *A Doll's House*. Bjørnson's *A Gauntlet*, too. Ridiculous courting, old-fashioned gallantry. Shall boys not be allowed to fuck, now that we are trying to give girls the same freedom! Who, then, will get to fuck these girls?⁵³

Strindberg was charged with blasphemy. Influential members of the upper class and the right-wing press thus sought to prevent further escalation of literary transgression. When the self-exiled author returned home to face trial, he was met with a rapturous welcome by young radicals, middle-class progressives, and other sympathizers. He was later acquitted.⁵⁴

The Best Life Has to Offer

Amalie Skram (1846–1905) was the movement's premier female writer. Her debut novel, *Constance Ring* (1885), offers a tragic account of how romantic indoctrination made middle-class women unprepared for marriage. Skram had been pressured into matrimony with an older man after her father went bankrupt and abandoned his family. Her husband's infidelity contributed to Skram's commitment to a psychiatric hospital, where she spent years. After her divorce, she moved to Kristiania with her two children, joined the Norwegian capital's bohemian community of artists, and began writing.

The protagonist in *Constance Ring* is horrified to learn of her husband's infidelity. He promises to stop but seems too addicted to the hormonal rush from sex with lower-class women. Constance embarks on a romantic and sexual exploration with three men in succession. Experiencing how human nature rarely plays out as in her romance novels, Constance descends toward suicide. She suffers confusion similar to that of the woman in *Niels Lyhne*, who expected the rush of love to last forever. After a year and a half's bliss with her second man, Constance notices how he stops courting her. For her, the monotony of attachment is not sufficient. She wants men to always be courting her, but she learns that without prospects of access to her sexuality, men are unwilling to play the part. Just friendship, explains her courter, "would for you be an

added luxury, something you get on the side, but for me it would be different. It would not be like for like.”⁵⁵

Once a woman had committed to a man, she had to submit to him and a life without romance. Her husband would turn his sexual attention to servants, prostitutes, or lower-class women—while his wife’s sexuality withered. At least judging by much literature of the Modern Breakthrough, this was how middle-class marriages unfolded. In the movement’s more simplistic “indignation literature,” such power relations inspired stories in which men were villains and women victims. Skram dramatizes how both male and female expectations and mate preferences lead to social dysfunction that harms both men and women.

In *Lucie* (1888), Skram’s protagonist contributes to her own demise by letting herself be overtaken by whichever neural stimuli allure her most. When men feel lust, she condemns them for only caring about one thing. When she feels the same rush, she interprets such feelings as love and therefore belonging on a different moral plane. The voice of reason is Mrs. Reinertson, who suggests that

if society were run on social democratic principles, all this would resolve itself. Because the crux of the problem is economic. In politics we know that might makes right. In the domain of love it’s the same, and here “might” means the opportunity for both men and women to properly provide for themselves.⁵⁶

In *Betrayed* (*Forrådt*, 1892), Skram offers additional confluent-love-aligned advice: “Know each other for seven years and then get married, if you have not yet lost your lust for each other.”⁵⁷ Her recommendation would be heeded, as modern Scandinavians have become the world’s leading premarital cohabitators.⁵⁸

Other female authors, such as Swedish Anne Charlotte Leffler (1849–1892) and Victoria Benedictsson (1850–1888), relied on personal experience to offer insights into how middle- and upper-class women experienced the transition from chastity to marriage. Different struggles were suffered by lower-class, promiscuous women, and these were explored in stories written by both female and male authors. Only the less renowned Nathalia Larsen (1855–1925) had personal experience to draw on when she wrote about “free love” from a woman’s perspective.⁵⁹ The Dane’s writing reaches a maturity toward the end of the 1880s that allows her later works to offer more than indignation at male villainy.

In “Guilt Free” (“Skyldfri,” 1890), Larsen shares an insightful account of her own bohemian relationship to Gustav Wied (1858–1914), another author who enjoyed infamy after his prose landed him in prison. The couple’s version of “true marriage” was one of cohabitation and complete

trust, but only until lust and love leave them. Larsen's protagonist, however, did not know "that it is always the man who leaves first."⁶⁰ This is clearly not universal, but the character's conclusion attests to the confusion that even the avant-garde suffered. Wied's leaving may have been influenced by how men desire greater partner variety, which in periods of female surplus leads men to prioritize short-term mating due to increased opportunity.⁶¹ After her man has left her, the protagonist dreads how her bohemian morals will be sanctioned now that she no longer has the refuge of their relationship.

In *Youth Stories (Ungdomshistorier, 1895)*, Wied tells the same story from his perspective. Like other authors had conveyed before him, Wied notes how "the intoxication" disappears after a certain period, leaving couples discontented. In spite of lust driving him to pursue ever-more partners, Wied concludes that human nature leaves a man no choice but to settle for attachment around age 30. The alternative is living "like gypsies all through life," missing out on being part of society with a wife and children.⁶² Wied mourns how such matrimonial compromises strip men of their manhood, reducing them to child breeders.⁶³

A more confrontational approach is offered by Hans Jæger (1854–1910) in *From the Kristiania Bohemian (Fra Kristiania-Bohømen, 1885)*. The restless young amateur philosopher had already become "Norway's most infamous man, with whom no decent person would associate."⁶⁴ Jæger had claimed that society's greatest ills were social inequality and marriage. He argued that a lack of "free love" deprived people of the best content life had to offer. No man could have a completely intimate relationship with a woman without sex, and even those who could afford to marry only got to experience such a relationship once. He suggested that, if instead of romantic marriages, we

have free love, so that men and women can leave each other and seek new love when they became transparent to each other, then we could throughout a lifetime create such complete intimate relationships to—well, it's hard to tell how many, that could vary; but I would for example say 20 women. In this case I was thus deprived, under the current social conditions, of 19/20 of my life's content.⁶⁵

Jæger's desire is similar to that of today's Norwegian men, who would prefer a total of 25 sex partners, while women desire 5—a sex difference that gender equality has not reduced.⁶⁶ Norwegians were aghast. Jæger describes how "old men stopped on the street and smilingly pointed me out for their old female companions as the man who wanted 20 wives."⁶⁷ His self-published novel was seized, and Jæger was submitted to mental evaluation.⁶⁸ 300 copies escaped confiscation, which stock companies

rented out per diem.⁶⁹ Jæger was fined and imprisoned, and he lost his job as stenographer at the Parliament. In spite of the pushback, he continued to argue that a young avant-garde should mate according to the bohemian ethos. For wider implementation, economic freedom was imperative. Jæger's definition of "free love" was not the "copulation en masse"⁷⁰ that many opponents of the Modern Breakthrough suspected; it was no more than social acceptance for serial monogamy. Jæger believed that such relations could be possible if the pair-bonding man and woman both had well-paid employment, so that

they would both create for themselves autonomous positions and love each other with independent freedom until love left them as easily as it had come, to be replaced by a new, different, and distinct love to a new, different, entirely distinct woman who also has an autonomous position and can let herself be loved without in return demanding provision and dependence for life.⁷¹

Fellow bohemian Arne Garborg (1851–1924) also emphasized how their movement's obsession with sex had a greater purpose. He understood "free love" to mean "free divorce," the right for men and women to move on without social sanctions.⁷² In *The Making of Daniel Brant* (*Bondestudentar*, 1883), *Men* (*Mannfolk*, 1886), and *Weary Men* (*Trøtte Mænd*, 1891), Garborg chronicles Norway's transition from rural tradition to urban gender dysfunction. For males in premarital limbo and women waiting for proposals, the romantic regime appeared not moral but cruel and nonsensical. To wake up those in power, this new reality would have to be displayed in all its horribleness through controversial literature; this was the bohemian ethos.

Garborg seems to have felt considerable pressure to live up to the infamy of his peers. After Jæger's novel had been seized, Christian Krohg (1852–1925) brought his novel, *Albertine* (1886), to the Minister of Justice before publication, insisting that he read its most controversial parts. *Albertine* is the story of a seamstress who is coerced into prostitution by the police, who regulate sex work. The narrative was incendiary, yet the Minister did nothing, referring to how Norway lacked censorship. After publication, *Albertine* was confiscated, and Krohg was fined. 5000 protestors rallied outside the Ministry, but the Minister still would not permit publication of Krohg's novel. He did, however, commit to overturning the 1868 law that had permitted regulated sex work.

Such legislative change, in addition to the public debate that followed confiscations, inspired Garborg to contact the Minister of Justice, advocating a seizure of his own *Men*. A national newspaper supported his demand. Garborg wrote that he had to "be indicted under the same law

that *Albertine's* author Christian Krohg is currently indicted under." Otherwise, intelligent readers "could get the impression that *Men* was less truthful and serious than *Albertine*," which could hurt Garborg's "reputation as author."⁷³ His plea was not heard. Authorities had perhaps grown wise to providing free PR and provoking thousands of progressives into bringing their grievances to the street.

The New Woman

Thus, the Scandinavian "morality debate" had reached its apex. The Modern Breakthrough neared its end as a unified movement, with naturalism giving way to neo-Romanticism and modernism.⁷⁴ First-wave feminism continued its political march as a line of legislative progress empowered Scandinavian women, from equal inheritance in the mid-1800s to universal suffrage by 1919. The metanarrative of confluent love made possible this reconceptualization of gender.

Novelists and playwrights had developed and disseminated new ways of thinking around mating that required new laws and institutions. Authors like Jacobsen helped people understand their own mating impulses, which aligned poorly with romantic love. Ibsen railed against the social consequences of romantic delusions, suggesting that "true marriage" could be possible if society stopped its legal infantilization of women, instead affording them the same liberal freedoms as men. Strindberg thought human nature was more complicated, so that a better understanding of our animal instincts could at best help couples suffer more amicably. Bjørnson suggested that human nature could be transcended, a naivety rejected by peers and audiences alike. Jæger and Skram offered the most prescient visions for gender relations. They imagined equality underpinned by similar male and female laborforce participation, a defining feature of social democracy.⁷⁵ They promoted serial monogamy as the key to creating good lives. For the Nordic bohemians, "free love" and "true marriage" became one and the same: an equal right to copulate and pair-bond for as long as the man and woman in question feel like it.

These new truths answered the question Nora had posed at the end of *A Doll's House*. Since the play's premiere, criticism has been haunted by the question of "*why* Nora leaves, what *her* motivations are."⁷⁶ Her exit is seen as "a decisive turning point . . . in the history of modern drama."⁷⁷ Even the progressive Brandes found Nora unconvincing,⁷⁸ as he could imagine no woman leaving her husband to attend to her own self-realization.⁷⁹ Later generations increasingly could.

As my investigation of the Modern Breakthrough has attested, *A Doll's House* and its associated literary movement are best understood as a Darwinian exploration of the transition from romantic to confluent love. Nora

leaves her family to live up to tomorrow's ideals. Modernity had convinced her that, without individualistic self-realization, she lived an inauthentic life—as did all women. In an early draft of the play, Ibsen wrote that “a woman cannot be herself in contemporary society.”⁸⁰ Over the next decades, progressive women had to redefine themselves to live up to the ideal of modernity's New Woman. *A Doll's House* ends by asking who the New Man might be in such a postromantic regime:

HELMER: Nora—can I never be more than a stranger to you?
 NORA: Ah, Torvald—it would take the greatest miracle of all—
 HELMER: Tell me the greatest miracle!
 NORA: You and I both would have to transform ourselves to the point that—Oh, Torvald, I've stopped believing in miracles.
 HELMER: But I'll believe. Tell me! Transform ourselves to the point that—?
 NORA: That our living together could be a true marriage.
 HELMER: Nora! Nora! Empty. She's gone. The greatest miracle—?
 (From below, the sound of a door slamming shut.)⁸¹

This purported miracle of male transformation is the main theme of Hjalmar Söderberg's oeuvre. In *The Serious Game* (1912), he explores the male identity under a regime of confluent love.

Notes

- 1 Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987).
- 2 Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.
- 3 Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*.
- 4 Oliver Scott Curry, “Morality as Cooperation: A Problem-Centred Approach,” in Todd K. Shackelford, and Randal D. Hansen, eds., *The Evolution of Morality* (New York: Springer, 2016), 27–51; Oliver Scott Curry, Daniel Austin Mullins, and Harvey Whitehouse, “Is It Good to Cooperate? Testing the Theory of Morality-as-Cooperation in 60 Societies,” *Current Anthropology* 6.1 (2019): 47–69.
- 5 Peter C. Kjærgaard et al., “Darwinizing the Danes, 1859–1909,” in Eve-Marie Engels and Thomas F. Glick, eds., *Reception of Charles Darwin in Europe* (London: Continuum, 2008), 146–55; Thore Lie, “The Introduction, Interpretation and Dissemination of Darwinism in Norway During the Period 1860–90,” in Eve-Marie Engels and Thomas F. Glick, eds., *Reception of Charles Darwin in Europe* (London: Continuum, 2008), 156–74; Mathias Clasen et al., “Translation and Transition: The Danish Literary Response to Darwin,” in Thomas F. Glick and Elinor Shaffer, eds., *Literary and Cultural Reception of Charles Darwin in Europe* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 103–27.
- 6 Norse elites were exposed to courtly ideology in the mid-1100s. By the mid-1300s, elites and commoners had internalized courtly ideals such as female consent; Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*.

- 7 Gelles-Watnick, "For Valentine's Day."
- 8 Vollset et al., "Fertility."
- 9 Apostolou, *Sexual Selection in Homo sapiens*.
- 10 Larsen, *Master-Narrative Transitions*.
- 11 <https://twitter.com/elonmusk/status/1440742298518577156>.
- 12 Nordic gender equality and welfare make it easier to have children but also create an independence for women that discourages them from pair-bonding with low-value men; Brooks et al., "Effects of Gender Inequality."
- 13 Mads Larsen, "An Evolutionary Case for Polygyny to Counter Demographic Collapse," *Frontiers in Psychology* 14 (2023):1062950.
- 14 The First Industrial Revolution began around 1760, primarily with steam power and new manufacturing processes. The Second took off around 1870, driven by steel, oil, and electricity. The Third brought computers in the 1980s. The current Fourth Industrial Revolution brings artificial intelligence, automation, biological enhancement, killer robots, etc. There exist varying definitions of content and timing for these periods of technological innovation.
- 15 Mads Larsen, "Adapting to Urban Pro-Sociality in Hamsun's *Hunger*," *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture* 4.2 (2020): 33–46.
- 16 BRC, "What Percentage."
- 17 "En ny kulturstrømning: Smuds-literaterne," *Morgenbladet* 1, April 22, 1886.
- 18 Elias Bredsdorff, *Den store nordiske krig om seksualmoralen* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1973).
- 19 Blom and Sogner, *Med kjønnsperspektiv på norsk historie*; Margareta R. Matović, *Stockholmsäktenskap: Familjebildning och partnerval i Stockholm 1850–1890* (Stockholm: Liber, 1984).
- 20 Seccombe, *A Millennium of Family Change*.
- 21 Collett's novel proposed a Lutheran creed of romantic love so dependent on communal altruism that it misaligned with human nature. Some post-Modern Breakthrough feminist works also offered penetrating analysis but naïve solutions. Minna Canth's *Anna-Liisa* (1895) diagnoses female subjugation through credible psychological drama but ends with an unironic embrace of Lutheran morals to solve what ails gender relations.
- 22 Kjærgaard et al., "Darwinizing the Danes"; Lie, "The Introduction"; Clasen et al., "Translation and Transition."
- 23 Kjærgaard et al., "Darwinizing the Danes."
- 24 For an earlier version of these interpretations, see Mads Larsen, "Untangling Darwinian Confusion around Lust, Love, and Attachment in the Scandinavian Modern Breakthrough," *Evolutionary Studies in Imaginative Culture* 5.1 (2021): 41–55.
- 25 Jens Peter Jacobsen, "Mogens," in *Mogens and Other Stories*, trans. Anna Grabow (New York: Nicholas L. Brown, 1921 [1872]), 15–84. Jacobsen became an author of exceptional prominence, celebrated across Europe at the turn of the century. Although he today is mostly forgotten outside of Scandinavia, his naturalist deep dives into human psychology inspired writers and thinkers such as Joyce, Mann, Freud, and Kafka. His remarkable career was cut short by tuberculosis when he was 38. Morten Høi Jensen, *A Difficult Death: The Life and Work of Jens Peter Jacobsen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).
- 26 Andersen, *Illustreret dansk litteraturhistorie*, 211.
- 27 Jacobsen, "Mogens," 64.
- 28 Jacobsen, "Mogens," 79.

- 29 Jensen, *A Difficult Death*.
- 30 Jens Peter Jacobsen, *Niels Lyhne*, trans. Hanna Astrup Larsen (New York: The American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1919 [1880]), 197.
- 31 Jacobsen, *Niels Lyhne*, 11.
- 32 Fisher, *Anatomy of Love*.
- 33 Jacobsen, *Niels Lyhne*, 12.
- 34 Marazziti et al., "Alteration of the Platelet Serotonin."
- 35 Jacobsen, *Niels Lyhne*, 12.
- 36 Larry Young and Brian Alexander, *The Chemistry Between Us: Love, Sex, and the Science of Attraction* (New York: Current, 2012).
- 37 Joan Templeton, "Ibsen's Legacy: Making the Theater Better," *Scandinavian Review* 94.2 (2006): 30–41, 36.
- 38 Ivo de Figueiredo, *Henrik Ibsen: The Man and the Mask*, trans. Robert Ferguson (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019).
- 39 Henrik Ibsen, *Letters and Speeches*, edited by Evert Sprinchorn (New York: Hill, 1964), 114.
- 40 Ibsen, *Letters and Speeches*, 123.
- 41 Ibsen, *A Doll House*, 196.
- 42 Maurice Valency, *The Flower and the Castle: An Introduction to Modern Drama* (New York: Random House, 1963), 162.
- 43 Henrik Ibsen, *The Wild Duck* [*Vildanden* (1884)], trans. Rolf Fjelde, in *Ibsen: The Complete Major Prose Plays*, 387–490 (New York: Plume, 1978), 460.
- 44 Ibsen, *The Wild Duck*, 465.
- 45 Bredsdorff, *Den store nordiske krig*.
- 46 Karl Gjellerup, *Arvelighed og moral: en undersøgelse* (Copenhagen: Andr. Schous forlag, 1881).
- 47 Per Lindberg, *August Lindberg* (Stockholm: Natur och kultur, 1943).
- 48 Sven-Erik Jansson and Lars-Åke Schröder, *August Strindberg* (Stockholm: Skriptor, 1981), 34.
- 49 August Strindberg, *Married* [*Giftas* (1884–86)], trans. Thomas Seltzer (New York: Boni and Liveright, 1917), 239.
- 50 Strindberg, *Married*, 226–8.
- 51 Albert A. Harrison and Laila Saeed, "Let's Make a Deal: An Analysis of Revelations and Stipulations in Lonely Hearts' Advertisements," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 35.4 (1977): 257–64; Aaron W. Lukaszewski and James R. Roney, "Kind toward Whom? Mate Preferences for Personality Traits are Target Specific," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 31.1 (2010): 29–38; Del Thiessen, Robert K. Young, and Ramona Burroughs, "Lonely Hearts Advertisements Reflect Sexually Dimorphic Mating Strategies," *Ethology and Sociobiology* 14.3 (1993): 209–29.
- 52 Mike Hawkins, *Social Darwinism in European and American Thought, 1860–1945: Nature as Model and Nature as Threat* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- 53 August Strindberg, "Till Pehr Staff," in Torsten Eklund, ed., *August Strindbergs breve*, vol. 4 (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1954 [1884]), 270.
- 54 Michael Meyer, *Strindberg: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).
- 55 Amalie Skram, *Constance Ring* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1997 [1885]), 233.
- 56 Amalie Skram, *Lucie*, trans. Katherine Hanson and Judith Messick (London: Norvik Press, 2014 [1888]), 94.
- 57 Amalie Skram, *Forrådt* [*Betrayed*] (Oslo: Den norske bokklubben, 1989 [1892]), 6.

- 58 Patrick Heuveline and Jeffrey M. Timberlake, "The Role of Cohabitation in Family Formation: The United States in a Comparative Perspective," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 66.5 (2004): 1214–30; Turid Noack, "En stille revolusjon: Det moderne samboerskapet i Norge," dissertation, University of Oslo, 2010.
- 59 Dahlerup, *Det moderne gjennebruds kvinder*.
- 60 Nathalia Larsen, "Skyldfri," *Tilskueren* 7 (April 1890): 280–9, 283.
- 61 Buss and Schmitt, "Mate Preferences and Their Behavioral Manifestations"; Timothy Adkins et al., "Student Bodies: Does the Sex Ratio Matter for Hooking Up and Having Sex at College?" *Social Currents* 2.2 (2015): 144–62.
- 62 Gustav Wied, *Ungdomshistorier* (Copenhagen: P. G. Philipsens forlag, 1895), 295.
- 63 Over a century later, Karl Ove Knausgård would make a similar point in his *My Struggle* hexalogy (*Min Kamp*, 2009–2011).
- 64 Bredsdorff, *Den store nordiske krig*, 120.
- 65 Hans Jæger, *Fra Kristiania-Bohømen* (Oslo: Self-published, 1885), 274.
- 66 Buss, *The Evolution of Desire*.
- 67 Jæger, *Fra Kristiania-Bohømen*, 282.
- 68 Ketil Bjørnstad, *Jæger: En rekonstruksjon* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 2001).
- 69 Nils Collett Vogt, *Fra gutt til mann* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 1932).
- 70 Carl Rosenberg, "'Den frie Tanke' og det danske Aandsliv i det 19de Hundredaar," *Hejmdal*, March 11, 1872.
- 71 Hans Jæger, *Fra Kristiania-Bohømen* (Oslo: Forlagskompaniet, 1895), 338–9.
- 72 Arne Garborg, "Diskussionen om Kjærlighed." *Ny Jord*, July, 1888.
- 73 Arne Garborg, "Beslaglæggelsen." *Dagbladet*, December 30, 1886, 1.
- 74 Scholars suggest different end dates, but most agree that by 1890, the Modern Breakthrough had played itself out. Brantly, ed., *Sex and the Modern Breakthrough*; Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).
- 75 Beth Ann Bovino and Jason Gold, "The Key to Unlocking U.S. GDP Growth? Women," S&P Global, 2017, https://www.spglobal.com/_Media/Documents/03651.00_Women_at_Work_Doc.8.5x11-R4.pdf.
- 76 Leonardo F. Lisi, "Kierkegaard and the Problem of Ibsen's Form," *Ibsen Studies* 7.2 (2007): 203–26, 218–9. Like Nora, women were supposed to restrict themselves to the domestic sphere as their husbands' subordinates. Ibsen based his dramatic conflict on this "essentialist conception of separate and irreconcilable gender spheres" Narve Fulsås and Tore Rem, *Ibsen, Scandinavia, and the Making of World Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 84.
- 77 Fulsås and Rem, *Ibsen*, 82.
- 78 Brandes's feminist credentials have been challenged. Although he was central to a movement that contributed to female emancipation, his promiscuity and unequal treatment of women have been criticized. He reviewed not a single Danish female author of the era; Dahlerup, *Det moderne gjennebruds kvinder*.
- 79 Fulsås and Rem, *Ibsen*, 93.
- 80 James Walter McFarlane, ed., *The Oxford Ibsen, vol. 5* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 436.
- 81 Ibsen, *A Doll House*, 196.

8 Consequences of Confluent Love

Self-Realization in *The Serious Game* (1912–2016)

By the early 1900s, the ideals of confluent love had been established. How to turn such ideals into a functional social order remained elusive. The fiery discussions around first-wave feminism can be viewed as an argument centered on how to implement the “true marriage” and “free love” that Westerners increasingly came to crave, although it was still unclear precisely which content it made most sense to project into those terms. Female emancipation cannot be separated from the discussion around modernity’s mating morality. Because this process to a great extent was driven by women fighting for their liberal rights, it is easy to lose sight of how the transition was similarly consequential for men. As a response to increasingly empowered women, Hjalmar Söderberg explores through *The Serious Game* (*Den allvarsamma leken*, 1912) who modernity’s New Man might be. The existential dread of this man-in-progress is portrayed as being no less painful than that of women like Nora, as both sexes had to step into the unknown to find modern answers and identities.

The protagonist, Arvid, and his romantic interest, Lydia, fall in love when she is 18 and he 5 years older. Both follow the romantic script. They cannot get married until he can afford a middle-class lifestyle. They can also not have sex, as both feel bound by norms for female chastity. Unable to fulfill the romantic utopia, they regress to mating informed by the companionate script. Lydia marries a 51-year-old rich and famous archeologist for economic safety. Arvid gets tricked into marriage by a woman whose father offers economic support. Both cheat on their spouses. A decade later, fate places them next to each other in the opera. They have sex, but this union of eternal beloveds does not lead to marriage and reproduction. Instead, *The Serious Game* dramatizes the questions that would define the twentieth-century evolution toward confluent love. Söderberg’s romance has been praised as Sweden’s only important love novel,¹ not because it is—in my opinion²—but because its thematic questions have continued to feel so relevant.

After the Third Sexual Revolution, Gun-Britt Sundström wrote a parallel novel, *For Lydia* (*För Lydia*, 1973), from the perspective of Arvid's beloved. The characters and plot are similar but placed in 1957–1972, when the modern marriage pattern reached its zenith, for then to disintegrate. Postwar economic growth had finally permitted a near-universal implementation of the breadwinner-housewife model,³ a radical change which let the romantic utopia reveal its shortcomings. Concurrently, people began having much more premarital sex; not just avant-gardes but regular people.⁴ After a steep decrease in divorces after the war, the rate skyrocketed.⁵ A desire for self-realization drove both breakups and promiscuity, as sex was by many embraced as the “most precious in what human relationships have to offer.”⁶ The dynamics of mating markets transformed. Lifelong monogamy had driven assortative mating, the search for one person of similar mate value. The emergence of a *de facto* polygynous regime allowed attractive men to accumulate a large number of lovers and partners.⁷ Sundström portrays how women gain access to high-value men for erotic adventures but not pair-bonding. An increasing stratification between low- and high-value men is set in motion, a process whose outcomes Sundström presents as causing harm to women. Historian Stephanie Coontz refers to the mid-1970s as a period of cultural backpedaling, as a reaction to the Third Sexual Revolution.⁸ *For Lydia* is part of this movement, a feminist response to an ideological change which Sundström perceives to mostly benefit men, as she lacks the conceptual apparatus to distinguish between men of low and high mate value.

Three film adaptations attest to the enduring relevance of Söderberg's romance. Works from 1945, 1977, and 2016 subtly change the story to engage challenges arising from the gradual implementation of confluent love—with regard to gender equality, self-realization, and reproduction, respectively. In all five versions of the tale of Arvid and Lydia, gender identity and interior transformation are key. Ibsen had asked how women would have to change under a regime of confluent love. Söderberg asks how men must change in response to women's legal, sexual, and existential empowerment. As the novel ends, Arvid leaves Stockholm in a Nora-esque manner. Men, too, had been confined to a narrow role, as breadwinners competing for status. Like Nora, Arvid must figure out who he can be if freed from romantic ideals. Like Ibsen, Söderberg ends his work without telling readers which answers his protagonist will find, as these confluent journeys are open-ended. The difference between women and men—according to Söderberg—is that women's independence from romantic ideology precedes that of men. Had Lydia offered to join Arvid in the end, he may have succumbed to his romantic programming. Men only realize that also they are trapped in a doll's house once their mate has found the exit and flown away, a pivotal insight if men are to achieve truly free

self-creation. Under the confluent regime, greater independence from biology and culture is a paramount ideal; both pair-bonding and reproduction became viewed as optional.

Freedom Outside of Love

Later generations would celebrate *The Serious Game* as the greatest love story written in Swedish. A perhaps overly parochial group of voters deemed it the fourth best in world literature.⁹ Contemporary critics, however, were befuddled by Söderberg's morally transgressive and stylistically proto-modernist novel. Söderberg had been a prominent fin-de-siècle author whose star was fading.¹⁰ His critical nemesis, Fredrik Böök, declares artistic bankruptcy: with *The Serious Game*, Söderberg has become uninteresting and his protagonist reduced to sex.¹¹ Hans Emil Larsson finds the novel to align with the era's depraved literature, which, he insists, only expresses the authors' personal vice, as their era does not suffer depravity. Larsson concludes that Söderberg's latest novel sets a Swedish record in nastiness, threatening young people's sex morals.¹² Sven Söderman condemns the novel's ethical nihilism.¹³ Birger Bäckström refuses to believe in the love story, as Arvid and Lydia speak too coldly to each other. He does not view the story to be a novel, as it includes too much material irrelevant to the story itself.¹⁴ Söderberg's proto-modernist mixing of plot and real-world events rubs several critics the wrong way. Only a few find the novel to be of exceptional quality, among them Pär Lagerkvist, the future Nobel laureate and pioneer of Swedish modernism. He writes that Söderberg's novel delivers artistically, stylistically, and psychologically.¹⁵

No contemporary critics recognized that Söderberg investigates a new ideology of love; they all interpret the story from a perspective of romantic love. The four most positive critics conclude that the novel ends in tragedy, as Arvid falls victim to his love for Lydia. She, however, is not a victim but driven by desire. They read Lydia to be a predatorial maneater without tragic dimensions.¹⁶ Böök finds the novel to exemplify what could happen if people undermine religion and morals. Great literature, states Olof Rabenius, should emphasize life's higher aspects.¹⁷

Two decades later, critics understood Söderberg's project. Sven Stolpe concludes that Söderberg was the first Swede to successfully describe love and suffering.¹⁸ Ingemar Wizelius states that "*The Serious Game* is our literature's only important love novel," adding that Lydia "is one of our literature's only vital portrayals of women."¹⁹ Söderberg's earlier New Woman gestalts—such as the eponymous protagonist in the play *Gertrude* (1906)²⁰—came across as mouthpieces for his ideology. Lydia feels real.²¹ Literary histories have upheld this positive assessment of Söderberg, who is considered among Sweden's greatest authors. The critical understanding of *The Serious Game* has deepened, concludes Bure Holmbäck, as emotions

have calmed and the historical context has become better understood.²² A key question has been how to interpret Lydia and Arvid's character arcs, as they evolve from being youths convinced by romantic love to becoming disillusioned adults trying to find new morals to live by.

Lydia has increasingly been read as a victim of her era's gender roles. Where men of the 1910s saw a femme fatale, Sten Rein sees a whole woman. He compliments how a male author has described a female psyche with such intellectual and emotional intimacy.²³ Åke Janzon finds Lydia to be mindlessly irrational.²⁴ Merete Mazzarella explains such seeming irrationality as a consequence of women's limited opportunities at the time. In the early 1900s, job and pay segregation had increased, but women made gains in sexual agency.²⁵ Lydia evolves into a femme fatale because sex was the only power women had. Without meaningful work and economic freedom, writes Mazzarella, "erotic freedom becomes destructive."²⁶

E. N. Tigerstedt draws a parallel from Ibsen to Söderberg, terming Gertrude "Nora's granddaughter."²⁷ Wizelius recognizes that Söderberg investigates not only how New Women free themselves from the sexual double standard but also how similarly New Men are fed up with power and status games. Several critics find Arvid to be trapped in the routines of the middle-class breadwinner.²⁸ Such reproductive obligations are connected to Arvid's love for Lydia and his reason for fleeing. Ulla Lundqvist concludes that Arvid leaves Sweden because Lydia's latest affair is too painful for him to handle.²⁹ Elena Balzamo writes that Arvid flees

weary and disheartened, without any plan for his future. Where does the fault lie? In that moment of defiance at the start of the novel, where the hero condemns himself by refusing to become 'tied down' to the girl that he nonetheless loves?³⁰

Such an interpretation misses the mark for *The Serious Game* but may have fit *Gertrude*, a play Söderberg wrote immediately after his affair with the woman who inspired both Gertrude and Lydia.³¹ This more conventional play ends with the female and male perspectives agreeing that love is the ultimate source of satisfaction. Six years later, Söderberg felt a distance to the affair, this "catastrophe that had stripped him of everything,"³² thus allowing him to envision the future of Western mating. In *The Serious Game*, more is at play when Arvid leaves Sweden than him merely giving up. Holmbäck finds that Arvid seems to enter into a new phase, one Söderberg leaves undefined. Mazzarella points to the confluent ideals embodied in this ending:

He has broken out of the cramped space of both marriage and extra-marital love, but hardly knows where he is going. For him, freedom is now expressly not something that has to do with love or cohabitation.³³

Through the following reading, I argue that critics have overlooked important aspects of Arvid's character arc. He is often interpreted to end the novel fleeing, despondent and without a plan, from a love he never could make work. From the perspective of confluent love, the climactic choice he makes appears more like a moral breakthrough.

Love as an Open-Ended Quest

The novel begins as a romantic cliché. Lydia swims naked and in love under the summer sun.³⁴ Her father, an artist, paints the idyll. She has fallen for Arvid, but as a middle-class daughter, she must play her passive part: "I wonder whether he loves me? Yes, of course he does. But does he really love me—really?"³⁵ She meows to great him; they meet "in a long kiss." Lydia desires to merge with her counterpart: "Do you think, Arvid, that you and I could someday make a little world for ourselves?" He would be the breadwinner and she the homemaker, a whole from complementary parts.

As the story begins, Arvid is the one hesitant to accept the romantic recipe for a good life. In line with the modern ethos,³⁶ he wants "a chance to do something worthwhile." He uses living in a narrow valley, blocked from the sun and wider world, as a metaphor for being trapped in the "little world." He is, however, aware of no alternatives, so he acquiesces to Lydia's request, but in words only: "I suppose we could try." Söderberg lets Lydia be the viewpoint character in this opening, then never returns to her perspective. We only observe her transformation into New Woman through Arvid whose love often blinds him to her challenges and needs. This makes Lydia a mystery that drives reader engagement. Contemporaries would understand her romantic starting point. But why a woman so deeply in love would have sex with other men—and use these affairs in a game of power with her beloved—required moral imagination. Her behavior is key to understanding confluent love, both for readers and Arvid. Without the New Woman's example, men would remain confined.

When Arvid takes over as viewpoint character, readers gain insight into the less romantic world of the era's men. Women could more easily delude themselves into thinking that a man and a woman were meant for each other, while men had to compete and seduce.³⁷ Not only Arvid, but also the two other men who spent the evening in Lydia's company are in love with her. Being assigned the active role in the romantic game, men must understand and master its dynamics. The New Woman disrupts this regime. The newspaper editor who mentors Arvid warns him: "Be careful! In the old days it was the man who went looking for a woman. That's old fashioned; now it's the woman who goes looking for a man.

And she'll stop at nothing!" The manner in which Arvid lost his virginity attests to the era's confusing mores. A young widow would have sex with him and half a dozen of his friends. She "simply did what was good for its own sake," but romantic ideology posited that women had no sexual desires outside of marriage. To avoid being accused of having an unnatural libido, the widow asked payment for sex, "mostly for the sake of form and decency." She had offered generous credit, as Arvid still owed her for 21 copulations.

Söderberg proposes that, when our mating morality needs updating, literature has a particular role to play. Referencing a fictional counterpart of his own literary work, he lets a character express that novels should be immoral. Living transgressively, searching for new truths, is the life of a writer, as their communities forgive them "just about anything. Nobody knows why, really, but that's the way it is. Writers are considered to be less responsible." Arvid, however, is "a human being and a man—not a writer!" He is unable to reconcile his modern desires with the romantic regime. He therefore regresses to companionate love, which he refers to as "Lutheran." After learning of Lydia's engagement to a rich old man, he lets his sex partner Dagmar lure him into marriage. She represents the ideology that had conceptualized spouses as partners in the business of raising children and "running the farm."³⁸ Söderberg relativizes mating moralities, emphasizing how "Arvid and Dagmar Stjärnblom lived a very happy life together." Their childrearing years testify to the diversity of the human experience, as not everyone needs strong emotions to appreciate a marriage.

Arvid's existential calm is disturbed when he encounters Lydia at the opera. The meeting rekindles his former aspirations, which I interpret to be a mix of romantic and confluent ideals. Lydia had given him a drawing with the text: "I want to go away, oh so far, far away." He had kept this drawing on him but quit doing so after settling for Dagmar. Going away to find yourself is part of the confluent ethos, which Lydia had moved toward after her father's death forced her to take action—in spite of her being a woman. She offered herself to Arvid, but he had practical reservations. His rejection triggered Lydia's first ideological crisis, making her transition in the direction of confluent love. She chose a loveless marriage because she wanted financial security and a child for self-realization.

Arvid's ethos is a mix of ideologies, as he still ties self-realization to acquiring Lydia as his eternal beloved. He wants to conquer the world but as part of a romantic dyad, so he begins carrying her drawing again. Lydia has already let go of the romantic utopia but tells Arvid that "it would be too much for me to go through life without ever having been yours!" For her current self, "being his" needs not include more than experiencing him

sexually. She has surrendered the romantic beliefs of her youth—but at a cost. She no longer identifies with what she wrote to Arvid about going away:

I'd like to change that line now. I'd like it to say: "I want to go home, I want to go home, to my real home!" But I simply don't know where that is. I don't know where I belong. I feel as though I am lost. I have sold my soul. The temptation wasn't that small: he took me to the top of the mountain and showed me the whole world! So I became a rich man's poor ornamental wife. Now I know that the words of that song tell the truth: "many years must mend what in a moment broke."

The metanarrative of romantic love had offered her a clearly defined outcome: love, lifelong monogamy, and reproduction. Confluent love offers an open-ended quest. Over the next few years, Lydia mends what broke by putting into practice confluent ideals and sharing her sexuality with one man after another. Söderberg offers a symbol for how confluent love could compensate for the loss of the romantic utopia's one big love. Modern science had created ruby amalgamate, "too cheap to be a ruby and too expensive for a piece of glass," which Arvid buys for Dagmar. She asks if the stone is an imitation. Arvid explains that chemists "amalgamate a lot of very small rubies, so small that they have no value as they are," into something he cannot tell apart from real, large rubies. The gem signifies passion, protection, and wealth, what marriages ideally should provide. Confluent love's serial monogamy and opportunistic copulations could perhaps, in their amalgamation through memory, offer something similar. Lydia arrives at this conclusion after leaving her husband.

Lydia lives as a single woman in Stockholm, financially provided for by her ex-spouse. Having finally earned her independence, Lydia no longer wants to merge with her great love. She tests Arvid's possessiveness by copulating with his young colleague. When this makes Arvid throw up and respond with insults, Lydia understands that he is unable to free himself from the double standard. If he can have sex with his wife, why should not she have lovers? She has updated her morals, but the man she loves has done so only partly. Arvid is unable to understand in which ways Lydia has changed and what her needs are. He begins thinking of her as a lustful femme fatal who would be unable to live up to his romantic ideals. She has become someone "who seduces man after man, never settling down until old age or death brings the supply to an end." His thinking is similarly confined by their era's gender ideals as hers had been before her father's death. As the final part of the novel begins, Lydia tells him, "I will never marry again . . . Once is enough. More than enough!"

The Special Relationship

With this declaration, the descendant of Ibsen's Nora rejects what most authors of the Modern Breakthrough had hoped was possible, a "true marriage." Holmbäck finds Söderberg's pessimistic philosophy of love to be part of his *naturalistic romanticism*, a term coined by Tigerstedt.³⁹ Not only do exclusive pair-bonds fail to offer a satisfying foundation for pair-bonding, but also open ones fail. The dream of "free love" is punctured, writes Mazzarella.⁴⁰ Holmberg concludes, "Marriage does not guarantee togetherness for men and women, but Söderberg sees no solution in the free bond either."⁴¹ Today, this may not seem as that bold of a claim. Confluent ideology has made us internalize that we will not be made whole by our partner and that partners tend to come and go. Cultural avant-gardes, such as those of the Modern Breakthrough, had hoped that "free love" could underpin "true marriage," thus achieving something similar to what the romantic utopia had aspired for. Confluent ideology was underpinned by the realization that Lydia, and later Arvid, arrived at: that mating does not offer such transcendent outcomes, at least not in the long run.

Dagmar clings to her companionate utopia, even after learning of Arvid's adultery. All she wants is a pragmatic relationship in which she can continue as a housewife. "There is an end to everything," says Arvid as he leaves her and their two daughters. The younger generation seems to have sided with Arvid. Lydia's most recent lover is fully on board with serial relationships. After half a year as Lydia's secret lover, he tells Arvid, "It's just about over . . . One has to be careful not to get trapped! One has to live a little first, at least!" When Arvid shares this exchange with Lydia, she is mostly offended by the young man having used the term "relationship" to describe their fling. Critics agree that Lydia still loves Arvid and that she means it when she now offers to marry him if he divorces his wife. She only does so because Arvid has decided to leave her. This is Lydia's last moment of hesitancy with regard to confluent ideals. When Arvid will neither marry her, nor invite her to travel, due solely to her sexual infidelity, "She avoided his eyes. He stood there silent for a long time. 'Well then,' she said finally, as if to herself, 'I suppose I don't have anything to save myself for. . .'"

She had said the same when Arvid rejected marriage after her father's death. That time, she began her journey toward confluent beliefs. This time, she completes it. The next time he hears from her, she writes of her fling, "I love him—have never loved so much!" Critics propose that Lydia writes this to spite Arvid, as revenge for him rejecting her marriage proposal.⁴² From a psychological perspective, this may be the case. But her emotional commitment to her lover—if we accept this as genuine—has

ideological implications that are more profound. Sociologist Anthony Giddens writes,

Confluent love is active, contingent love, and therefore jars with the “for-ever,” “one-and-only” qualities of the romantic love complex. The “separating and divorcing society” of today here appears as an effect of the emergence of confluent love rather than its cause. The more confluent love becomes consolidated as a real possibility, the more the finding of a “special person” recedes and the more it is the “special relationship” that counts.⁴³

Having left her special person behind, Lydia embraces her fling as the person who will offer her fulfillment in the present. Nothing in her final meeting with Arvid suggests that she is not genuinely committed to her new lover. She had told Arvid that after ending an earlier one-year affair, when she reencountered her lover, she “couldn’t believe that I had loved him once upon a time.” As *The Serious Game* ends, Arvid imagines her telling her new lover that, after saying farewell to Arvid at the train station, she “couldn’t understand at all why I had loved him once upon a time.”

This is the confluent attitude Arvid must adopt. Doing so will require emotional reprogramming through experience, perhaps provided by his travels. Simply deciding to change suffices not, as illustrated by how, when Lydia shows up at the train station, his thoughts immediately regress: “For a few millionths of a second the insane idea flew through his brain that she wanted to come with him—now and forever.” Had not Lydia’s painful, protracted experiences allowed her to become so firm in her beliefs and let these guide her actions, it seems unlikely that Arvid, now that his jealousy had calmed, could have resisted his romantic programming. Alone on the train, he commits to his transformation:

I do want to see if a wider world exists—a world ‘outside Verona.’ I seem to remember that I once had the feeling that it did. . . . But perhaps I have been confined too long inside Mount Venus to be able to survive in that world.

Söderberg’s romance ends on a confluent note: “. . . And the train rolled on. . . .”

Four Adaptations

To where this train of confluence was headed was at first obvious: looser marital bonds. A new understanding of men and women not as

complementary but autonomous individuals informed Scandinavia's pioneering marriage equality acts that were negotiated in the 1910s. Decades before the large European nations, this progressive outpost ended men's legal power over spouses. Viewing the marital pair-bond as a conditional union of cooperating individuals underpinned no-fault divorce, equal property distribution, and shared responsibility for family support. In this modified dual breadwinner model, women's unpaid domestic labor was recognized as support.⁴⁴

In the 1920s, sexuality became more important within the still-hegemonic romantic regime. One reason for referring to Lydia as a *proto*-New Woman, which some critics do, is *The Serious Game's* lack of emphasis on great reciprocal sex. Uncommitted copulation empowers Lydia, but Söderberg always cuts from pre- to postcopulation. Readers do not get to witness how orgasms cement love bonds. This new ideological tenet would be known as the *pleasure principle*.⁴⁵ If a pair-bond was to last, people increasingly expected it to offer great sex for both parties. A marital advice expert claimed that "every case of divorce had for its basis lack of sexual satisfaction."⁴⁶ Since the Second Sexual Revolution, the patriarchy had gradually been declawed⁴⁷; now, good sex was the glue that should hold marriages together.

At the dawn of the post-World War II era, writer-director Rune Carlsten retold *The Serious Game* (*Den allvarsamma leken*, 1945) with remarkable fidelity yet a telling change in perspective. Much dialog is lifted right off the novel's pages, but the adaptation attests to a cultural transformation regarding female equality. The novel had been Arvid's story, seen from his perspective, except for the first pages. Carlsten's love story gives similar attention to both parties. Lydia's (Viveca Lindfors) behavior is no more mysterious than Arvid's (Olof Widgren). She is not a threatening New Woman about to undermine Western civilization, but an individual who attests to the diverse ways through which women can live out their love and sexuality. She commits to confluent love on the train station when she declares of her new lover, "I love him, have never loved so much." This is portrayed as a moral triumph. She radiates like a person who finally has found her true self. Arvid caresses her hand, supporting her breakthrough with a sympathetic smile. Carlsten's only significant plot change is the ensuing resolution scene. Dagmar (Eva Dahlbeck) tells their daughters, "He's coming back. I know he's coming back." Söderberg's subversive novel had portrayed Lydia as the vanguard of a new mating regime. The 1945 adaptation offers hope for family reunification. The film ends with Carlsten making actual what Arvid had only fantasized of in the novel, that Lydia tells her new love, "I couldn't understand at all that I had ever loved him."⁴⁸ Three decades after the novel, Carlsten tells us that women can be both ways: wanting a traditional marriage or moving on.

The Third Sexual Revolution began with men's *conformity revolt* against the breadwinner role. With *Playboy* (1953–), Hugh Hefner promoted the ideal that men should be able to enjoy women's sexuality without emotional or financial obligations.⁴⁹ This movement culminated with the feminist revolt of 1968.⁵⁰ Radical activists of the late 1960s and early 1970s demanded “free love” and drastic changes to male–female relationships. Good sex was no longer only a means for cementing romantic bonds but had intrinsic, existential value. In *For Lydia*, the protagonist protests this sexual emphasis. Sundström retells the story through Lydia's perspective to argue against Arvid's double standard but also to engage how confluent freedoms result in new harm against women. Sundström stages Lydia's first affair in a manner which portrays “free love” to primarily benefit high-value men who are incentivized to emotionally deceive their lovers. When Lydia meets Jan—a capable player on the short-term mating market—she is immediately attracted, so much so that it challenges her mating beliefs. She had not thought it possible to feel so strong lust for someone she had not known for a considerable length of time.

Romantic ideology had portrayed our attraction system as unified. As a result of hominin evolution—which we covered in the Introduction chapter—it is illuminating to conceptualize humans as having two attraction systems, which Helen Fisher refers to as “lust” and “love.”⁵¹ The former is the older system, which under early hominins' promiscuous regime motivated females to primarily breed with the most attractive males. Hominin pair-bonding required a love system, which typically takes longer to engage but is less discriminatory, as it can motivate copulation also with lower-value males.⁵² Becoming the target of a high-value man's seduction efforts, Lydia's lust system triggers immediate attraction. Confluent love promotes that she should give in to such desires, but the ideology lacked cultural scripts conveying that high-value men typically would only want lower-value women for copulation but not pair-bonding.⁵³ Even today, our mating regime fails to convey the reality of these promiscuous mechanisms to many women, an information failure that informs the phenomenon of female insings (involuntary singles), which I explore in Chapter 10.

Sundström stages these market dynamics by letting Jan be a charming medical student with great social skills, who also is “handsome, tall, and well-proportioned, almost too well-proportioned she would have said, if something like that was possible.”⁵⁴ Lydia is confused by her era's regime of individual choice, in which most women now have practically unlimited access to casual sex with high-value men. She eventually does what courtly love had posited as crucial: to solicit a sign of credible commitment. Unlike Ísönd, she is in no position to ask her courter to kill a dragon to prove his love. Timidly, Lydia asks Jan if he believes in the two of them. He brushes away her query with clever philosophy. She wants “some sort

of continuation,” but as an attractive male facing a high supply of female sexuality, Jan is not incentivized to commit. He is not honest about his short-term intentions until he breaks off their relation. Emotionally hurt, Lydia demands to know if he loves her. “Yes, I love women,” he answers, “Monogamous I am not.”⁵⁵

Söderberg had staged similar dynamics, but in a different environment. In the early 1900s, promiscuous women could suffer greater reputational damage. Men faced a greater risk of making their lover pregnant. The young Arvid committed to a deep moral change in the aftermath of having impregnated a working-class girl. Having to pay for the child’s upkeep taught him a lesson: “After that incident he had resolved that never ever, without exception, would he again seduce a ‘poor’ girl.” Söderberg portrays how the sexual impulses of attractive men are restrained by social and biological checks and balances. Such constraints were greatly weakened in the 1960s. Sundström found the resulting mating market to be a poor fit for most women. In *For Lydia*, she writes that journalists portray her era’s New Woman as being as obsessed as men are with having many sex partners and transgressive sexual experiences. The emotional requirements of confluent love, notes Lydia, comprise “a too demanding balancing act, a feat of equilibrium for the most capable, to applaud if they really succeed, but for us regular amateurs?”⁵⁶ Sundström wrote in a magazine that she did not want to promote women’s erotic liberation, not “in today’s situation when ‘equality’ in this domain entails that even for women the goal should be to ‘conquer’ as many as possible.”⁵⁷

The journey toward confluent love was one of both behavioral and psychological adaptation. Writer–director Anja Breien’s 1977 film offers an artistically masterful exploration of the existential challenges inherent in the new mating morality. The 1945 adaptation had focused on the mechanisms of forging a relationship, the external forces that prevented this, and the social consequences of illicit love. Breien lets the interiority of Arvid (Stefan Ekman) and Lydia (Lil Terselius) take center stage. Their longing for each other is portrayed as a more narcissistic, anxiety-ridden search for self-realization. Their relationship being special appears mostly apparent to them. Breien emphasizes the individualistic, nonsocial aspects of their bond by letting the couple be alone in an extraordinary number of scenes. The pleasure principle is given attention through sex scenes with nudity and passion. When they bid farewell at the train station, they are still tender toward each other. Lydia says nothing about loving the man from her most recent affair. Audiences are given the impression that, although Arvid and Lydia have a special relationship, individuals must eventually break up and move on.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the confluent journey took a new turn. The modern marriage pattern unraveled. Westerners married later, divorced

a lot more, remarried a lot less, premarriage sex became the norm, and the sex division of labor was greatly reduced. People to a greater extent embraced contingent love and individualistic fulfillment, not familial duty. Holmbäck interprets Söderberg to have envisioned how the outcome of such an ethos will be “resignation and incurable loneliness.”⁵⁸ Those emotions involve suffering for the individual, but modern decoupling also results in a less stable frame for childrearing.

The 2016 adaptation by writer Lone Scherfig and director Pernilla August turns Lydia’s relationship to her daughter into the film’s emotional spine. In Söderberg’s novel, giving up her daughter was the price Lydia paid for independence, similar to the burden imposed on Ibsen’s Nora. In 1973, Sundström had let Lydia give up her daughter more easily. In the parallel novel, Lydia justifies the fact that her child does not like visiting her: “A good mother is happy when her child can do without her. Is she not?”⁵⁹ August lets her adaptation’s midpoint be Lydia swearing to her daughter that they will meet again. The film ends with the two reuniting at the train station. When they run into Arvid, Lydia refers to him merely as an old acquaintance. As her daughter pulls her away, Lydia is not even glancing back at Arvid, her former beloved. August’s twenty-first-century insight seems to be that romantic relationships mostly fall apart. This is no longer the mystery it was in 1912. Yet such unions still fulfill their ultimate function: reproduction. Good mothers should therefore focus their love on the children they produce, not the men they leave behind. August’s moral upgrading of women is reflected in how the film’s men are made far more villainous, while its female characters are portrayed more as hapless victims.⁶⁰ In the romantic world of Söderberg’s era, an independent woman was a threatening *femme fatale*. In August’s confluent Sweden, men stand in the way of the more lasting love that women have for their children.

The Market Logic of Intimacy

Söderberg did not support such an evolution of confluent love, one of decoupling and familial estrangement. Holmbäck reads his oeuvre to side with long-term, monogamous relationships being the preferable frame for mating. His sensualism made some critics interpret him to support libertine love, but Holmbäck rejects this, as Söderberg mostly argues for couples’ right to copulate without being married.⁶¹ Moreover, *The Serious Game* conveys how the modern ethos encourages individuals to find their core identity outside of romantic relationships. The cost is likely to be an increased sense of loneliness, but the benefits are autonomy and authenticity. Whether this is the optimal strategy is left an open question.

Söderberg conceptualized this process of emancipation to be led by women. Mazzarella reads *The Serious Game* to be about the Western

woman's awakening need for autonomy, more so than what Söderberg himself may have understood. The story's main theme, she finds, is the tradeoff between our needs for intimacy and freedom.⁶² Paradoxically, the novel's women, who have less freedom, show far greater agency in shaping their lives. As they find the romantic regime unworkable, they need different tenets to guide their mating behavior. Confluent love's emphasis on autonomy, equality, and self-realization is a better fit for women who desire more from life than being a housewife. What type of intimacy such ideology promotes is less clear. Söderberg sides with the romantic utopia not being possible, as individuals cannot merge into a greater whole. He is less clear about what the best alternative may be; to seek an answer to this question, Arvid must leave his old world behind.

Magdalena Wasilewska-Chmura argues that *For Lydia* goes further, revealing that love is a myth.⁶³ In this ideological regard, Sundström's parallel novel is a fitting sequel, although I find the same theme, more subtly conveyed, also in Söderberg's version. *The Serious Game* is innovative in that it stages all ideologies of love as being relative; there is no truth, or solid foundation, that could ensure a harmony of the sexes.⁶⁴ Our emotions evolved for pair-bonds of a much shorter duration than what is optimal in the modern environment. Mating moralities must bridge the gap. Once we understand these ideologies as relative or place greater emphasis on individual concerns, people will be less motivated to incur reproductive costs. Being afforded greater agency will also motivate more women to pursue higher-value men, a strategy that results in promiscuity to the detriment of pair-bonding and reproduction.⁶⁵ Beneath ideology is a biological reality that strongly influences our mating behavior; this I view as the core tenet of Söderberg's naturalistic romanticism. The Ibsenian doll's house was an ideological construction that had motivated middle-class couples to remain confined within a cage optimized for reproduction. *The Serious Game* stages how also men must break out of this cage if they are to live up to the modern ideals of individualism and freedom. Again, whether this is the optimal strategy, Söderberg leaves an open question, as his proto-modernist literature is mostly exploratory.

How confluent love promotes convenience, self-realization, and reward makes our era's high levels of singledom and promiscuity—and impending demographic collapse—somewhat predictable. After the contraceptive pill of the 1960s, self-realization through sex was largely disconnected from reproduction. *For Lydia* spells out how, if we reject the myth of love, what remains is sexual freedom. This reduces our mating ideology, writes Wasilewska-Chmura, to a practical question of having someone with whom to copulate.⁶⁶ Not thinking that a certain man and woman are meant for each other, and embracing that love should be contingent, legitimized a

more overt application of market logic to intimate relationships—precisely what Ludvig Holberg had warned against more than two centuries earlier. Humans have always considered each other's mate value—and made cynical calculations with regard to copulation and pair-bonding—but mating moralities often compelled them to also incorporate compassion and consider social consequences. Courtly love promoted courtesy and fidelity. Companionate love put family and community ahead of individual concerns. Romantic love extolled high-value men but restricted them to having only one mate. Confluent love did for mating markets what neoliberalism did for financial markets; unbridled individualism was assumed to aggregate to a societal good.

Sofi Oksanen makes no such assumptions in *Baby Jane* (2005). This queer novel heads straight for the jugular of modern mating. It portrays how our era's increasing marketization and exploitation of intimacy can turn sex and relationships into misanthropic practices that cause widespread harm. The novel's ideology of *queer love* functions as a cultural dissolvent that undermines the tenets of confluent love. Its lesbian protagonist couple dehumanize heterosexual men to exploit them economically in a manner that appears somewhat justified; from a queer perspective, it appears perhaps even heroic. I read Oksanen not as promoting female or queer supremacism but as trying to open up people's eyes to the shortcomings of our era's morality of mating.

Notes

- 1 Ingemar Wizelius, "Den obefintliga kärleksromanen," *Dagens Nyheter*, April 15, 1945.
- 2 *The Serious Game* is important and impressive, but it is nearsighted to call it Sweden's only important love novel—a claim that mostly makes sense from our present day's perspective of confluent love. Many important love novels were written in the nineteenth century, but their romantic perspectives today typically come across as less relevant.
- 3 Stephanie Coontz writes that "by the 1960s, marriage had become nearly universal in North America and Western Europe, with 95% of all persons marrying." People also married younger. By 1959, nearly half of American women were married by age 19, and 70% were married by age 24; Coontz, *Marriage, a History*, 225–6.
- 4 Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family*.
- 5 In 1958, the American divorce rate was less than half of what it had been in 1947; Coontz, *Marriage, a History*, 225.
- 6 Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family*, 79.
- 7 Serial monogamy is often referred to as a *de facto* polygynous regime as it distributes many more mates to the highest-value men, while some of the lowest-value men are excluded from short- and long-term mating; Blake and Brooks, "Societies Should not Ignore their Incel Problem."
- 8 Coontz, *Marriage, a History*.

- 9 Per Wästberg, "Inledning," in *Hjalmar Söderberg's skrifter: Den allvarsamma leken* (Stockholm: Liber, 1977), 5–18.
- 10 Bure Holmbäck, *Det lekfulla allvaret: Studier över erotiska och polemiska motiv i Hjalmar Söderbergs roman Den Allvarsamma leken, mot bakgrund av hans tidigare författarskap* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers, 1969).
- 11 Fredrik Böök, "Den allvarsamma leken," *Svenska Dagbladet*, December 21, 1912.
- 12 Hans Emil Larsson, "Litteratur. Valérie af Anna Branting. *Den allvarsamma leken* af Hjalmar Soderberg," *Sydsvenska Dagbladet*, December 17, 1912.
- 13 Sven Söderman, "Svensk prosastil. *Den allvarsamma leken*," *Stockholm Dagblad*, December 21, 1912.
- 14 Birger Bäckström, "Den allvarsamma leken," *Göteborgs-Posten*, December 9, 1912.
- 15 Pär Lagerkvist, "Litteratur: Hjalmar Soderberg. *Den allvarsamma liken*," *Stormklockan*, March 29, 1913.
- 16 Bodil Verhaegen Sommer, "Den Allvarsamma Leken i svensk press 1912–1914. Försök till en receptionsundersökning," *Tijdschrift voor Skandinavistiek* 3.2 (1982): 47–77.
- 17 Olof Rabenius, "Svenska romaner och noveller," *Ord och Bild* (1914): 54–57.
- 18 Sven Stolpe, *Hjalmar Söderberg* (Stockholm: Albert Bonnier, 1934).
- 19 Wizelius, "Den obefintliga kärleksromanen."
- 20 Hjalmar Söderberg, Gertrud. *Skådespel i tre akter* (Stockholm: Albert Bonnier, 1906).
- 21 Wästberg, "Inledning."
- 22 Holmbäck, *Det lekfulla allvaret*.
- 23 Sten Rein, *Hjalmar Söderbergs Gertrud: studier kring ett kärleksdrama* (Stockholm: Albert Bonnier, 1962).
- 24 Åke Janzon, "Den förklarade trolösheten," *Svenska Dagbladet*, February 9, 1973.
- 25 Coontz, *Marriage, a History*.
- 26 Merete Mazzarella, *Otrohetens lockelse: En bok om äktenskapet* (Helsingfors: Forum, 1997), 205.
- 27 E. N. Tigerstedt, "Kärleksläran i Hjalmar Söderbergs Gertrud," *Nordisk tidskrift för vetenskap, konst och industri* 31 (1955): 185–99.
- 28 Wästberg, "Inledning."
- 29 Ulla Lundqvist, *Läsäventyr från när och fjärran: Tolv bokpresentationer för unga vuxna* (Lund: Bibliotekjänst, 1994).
- 30 Elena Balzamo, "Toying with Happiness: An Introduction to Hjalmar Söderberg's *The Serious Game*," in *The Serious Game* (London: Marion Boyars Publishers, 2001), eBook.
- 31 Louise Keinström, "Söderberg och Sundström: En komparativ karaktärsanalys av *Den Allvarsamma Leken* och *För Lydia*," thesis, Uppsala University, 2020.
- 32 Balzamo, "Toying with Happiness."
- 33 Mazzarella, *Otrohetens lockelse*, 193.
- 34 For a discussion on Lydia's purported nakedness, see Linnéa Hammarstrand, "Förre århundradets kärlekskrig: En komparativ genusanalys av Hjalmar Söderbergs *Den allvarsamma leken* och Gun-Britt Sundströms *För Lydia*," thesis, Uppsala University, 2016.
- 35 Söderberg, *The Serious Game*. Since this is an eBook, there are no page numbers to reference. I do not offer notes with subsequent citations.
- 36 Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*.

- 37 Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*.
- 38 Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*.
- 39 Holmbäck, *Det lekfulla allvaret*; Tigerstedt, “Kärleksläran.”
- 40 Mazzarella, *Otrohetens lockelse*, 203.
- 41 Holmbäck, *Det lekfulla allvaret*, 301.
- 42 Lundqvist, *Läsäventyr*.
- 43 Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*, 61–2.
- 44 Kari Melby, Anu Pylkkänen, Bente Rosenbeck, and Christina Carlsson Wetterberg, “The Nordic Model of Marriage,” *Women’s History Review* 14.4 (2006): 651–61.
- 45 Coontz, *Marriage, a History*, 233.
- 46 Coontz, *Marriage, a History*, 204.
- 47 Trumbach, *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family*.
- 48 Carlsten, *Den allvarsamma leken*, 98–100.
- 49 Coontz, *Marriage, a History*.
- 50 From an ideological perspective, it may seem preposterous to conceptualize Hugh Hefner and the feminists of 1968 as part of the same sexual revolution. Both male and female emancipation efforts were driven by the same individualistic impulses, but men and women had different challenges and concerns.
- 51 Fisher, *Anatomy of Love*.
- 52 Conceptualizing human mate attraction as consisting of two distinct systems involves simplification. We do not know precisely how our evolutionary past expresses itself in different attraction systems or the details of their mechanisms. For a discussion of the relevant scholarship, see Bode, “Romantic Love Evolved by Co-Opting Mother-Infant Bonding.”
- 53 High-value men—those with success on short-term markets—also tend to be more short-term oriented. As a result, even women with matching mate value often fail at convincing such men to agree to a committed long-term relationship; Goetz et al., “Evolutionary Mismatch in Mating.” Conceptualizing high-value men as those successful on promiscuous markets is a simplification. People can be assigned different mate values on short- and long-term markets. I elaborate in Chapter 10.
- 54 Sundström, *För Lydia*, 82.
- 55 Sundström, *För Lydia*, 98.
- 56 Sundström, *För Lydia*, 198.
- 57 Gun-Britt Sundström, “Gun-Britt Sundström från andra hållet,” *Svensk bokhandel* 11–12 (1973): 248–9, 249.
- 58 Holmbäck, *Det lekfulla allvaret*, 167.
- 59 Sundström, *För Lydia*, 143.
- 60 Rebecka Mellberg, “In, jag vill in: Kvinnornas resa genom adaptationsprocessen av *Den allvarsamma leken* 2016,” thesis, Södertörn University, 2016.
- 61 Holmbäck, *Det lekfulla allvaret*.
- 62 Mazzarella, *Otrohetens lockelse*.
- 63 By “myth,” I interpret Wasilewska-Chmura to mean that the nineteenth-century understanding of romantic love is ideological. Pair-bonding emotions, which often are referred to as “romantic love,” are neither mythical, nor relative; they are a human universal, although how these emotions are expressed and understood is culturally mediated.
- 64 Magdalena Wasilewska-Chmura, “Gun-Britt Sundstroms roman *For Lydia* som kvinnlig dialog med en manlig klassiker,” in András Masát, ed., *Literature as Resistance and Counter-Culture: Papers of the 19th Study Conference of*

the International Association for Scandinavian Studies (Budapest: Hungarian Association for Scandinavian Studies, 1993), 520–3.

- 65 After the Second Sexual Revolution, promiscuity drove a reproductive boom. After the Third Sexual Revolution, effective contraceptives and abortion largely detached promiscuity from reproduction.
- 66 Wasilewska-Chmura, “Gun-Britt Sundstroms roman.”

9 Lesbian Heroic Love

A Queer Dissolution of Confluent Love in *Baby Jane* (2005)

In this study, I have mostly investigated ideologies of love that gained cultural hegemony. Libertine love was the clearest exception. It played a subversive role when the EMP burst, but broad population segments did not embrace promiscuous mating as a source of superior intoxication. With all dominant cultural scripts, such as master-narratives or mating moralities, not everyone needs to buy in. Enough people need to let their behavior be informed by hegemonic beliefs or society unravels, but moral communities can afford some dissent. In fact, moral renewal is dependent on it. Most norm-breakers simply free-ride on the cooperative altruism of their community, but some spearhead tomorrow's norms and values. The bohemian authors of the Modern Breakthrough illustrated this function. In *Baby Jane* (2005), Sofi Oksanen (1977–) offers counterculture insights from a milieu that could be our present-day bohemians.

As the novel begins, the unnamed protagonist and her fiancée Piki think they have cracked the code. Men are pathetic swine who will pay exorbitant prices for used underwear just to get the whiff of a woman. To avoid regular work, all the lesbian couple need to do is talk sultrily to men on the phone and sell them whichever ridiculous kink object they desire. Through dehumanizing their heterosexual customers, the couple justify economically exploiting them in a manner that forms an interesting symmetry with antiquity's heroic love. As I touched on previously, having faced different pressures, men evolved to view women more as sex objects and women to view most men more as resource providers.¹ When the patriarchy enjoyed peak power, antiquity's high-status men commoditized women as sex objects and for other purposes—as I covered in Chapter 1. The First, Second, and Third Sexual Revolutions empowered women. In *Baby Jane*, Oksanen stages a matriarchal revenge, a poetically just commoditization of men as faceless resource providers. Mercantile and mating markets are portrayed as one and the same: the couple use their sexual power to profit off men's desires; and, after Piki breaks up, the protagonist feigns love to deceive a man into providing for her. The women see no greater

humanity in the men they ensnare, mock, and laugh at than the Vikings saw in the women they assaulted. The atrocities and consequences of patriarchal oppression were far greater, but what I term *lesbian heroic love* serves a similar function as heroic love had done: to ideologically justify using one's power advantage to exploit members of the other sex.

But what could possibly Oksanen be trying to convey? That it is women's turn to oppress men? That lesbian love is superior to the heterosexual variety? This queer love story²—with its occluded political agenda and pitch-dark ending—has confounded critics. Finland's most accomplished living author has been honored for her advocacy for queer communities in the Baltic region,³ but only her second of six novels centers on same-sex love. *Baby Jane* is Oksanen's most distinct—and perhaps most under-researched—novel. Oksanen's other works mostly explore the suffering of Eastern European women under Soviet and post-Soviet oppression. Ebba Witt-Brattström reads her oeuvre as “a form of literature which always sides with women,” downgrading men and condemning their evilness toward women.⁴ The winning formula behind Oksanen's transnational success, writes David Williams, is her “clean/dirty, innocent/evil dichotomy.”⁵ David Clarke rejects this common interpretation, concluding that Oksanen offers “a much more complex and subtle representation of victimhood, which challenges such dichotomies.”⁶ In this chapter, I argue that *Baby Jane* offers a key to Oksanen's complex understanding of gender, mating, and victimhood. She applies a queer perspective on confluent love to show how imperative it is that we seek a new morality that can inspire more humane mating.

I propose that queer ideology might serve a similar function for the upcoming Fourth Sexual Revolution as courtly and libertine love did for the First and Second, respectively. All three are metanarratives that undermine hegemonic beliefs without offering viable alternatives. Medieval commoners could no more wander Europe as knights looking for distressed maidens than early modern farmers could fornicate like royals. Tellingly, I could spend the rest of the book exploring competing understandings of what “queer” implies. Such thought is often criticized for not being sufficiently constructive and denouncing but offering few solutions. Clearly, you cannot build a social order on pessimism alone. Theorists like Jack Halberstam counter such indictments by arguing that we cannot know what is possible before we have removed what is.⁷ Queer thinking, and perhaps all postmodern thought, primarily function to undermine dominant ideology to make room for what must come next. *Baby Jane* is written in this tradition.

If my understanding of queer thought is on point, it is intriguing that an ideology that arose from gay culture should undermine confluent love. There was a strong connection between romantic love and homophobia.

Positing that men and women were incomplete individuals, meant to become whole through a heterosexual pair-bond, contributed to how nineteenth-century sexologists and later psychologists viewed homosexuality as deviance and pathology. Alongside the romantic regime's post-World War II peak, homophobia also peaked.⁸ In the Nordic countries, the Third Sexual Revolution was an almost entirely heterosexual movement, but it provided the ideological foundation for gay equality.

The region's queer literature—as was common elsewhere, too—had used confluent ideals to promote gay rights. In the 1930s, Agnes von Krusenstjerna's novels had portrayed lesbian love as equally beneficial as hetero love. She connected queerness to female empowerment and undermined romantic ideals by portraying relationships which did not unite opposites. In the 1960s, the debate around sexuality turned from reproduction to individual freedom and pleasure. With pair-bonding now being more about compatibility, same-sex love could even be portrayed as superior to heterosexuality as a political means for gaining acceptance. Annakarin Svedberg's 1960s literature caricatured men as so abominable that lesbian relationships seemed better suited for delivering on confluent love's promise of reward and self-realization. Jenny Björklund reads Svedberg's oeuvre to convey that “the only way for women to combine love and freedom is lesbianism, where love is based on closeness and equality.”⁹ Svedberg also made use of the era's far-left politics to smear heterosexuality, tying such pair-bonds to material consumption and deceitful facades.

Oksanen, too, portrays heterosexual men as inferior partners and lackeys of capitalism but goes further. *Baby Jane*'s lesbian couple take anti-hetero ideology to the next level to justify economic exploitation. The novel adds to the queer tradition the idea that lesbians should have the opportunity to be funded by men, as a consequence of men's inferiority. Such supremacism delighted several critics but made the novel's ending more perplexing, as lesbians alone are responsible for the protagonist couple's seemingly tragic demise.

How to Interpret Queer Suicidal Pessimism

Baby Jane takes place in Helsinki in 1995–2002. The young protagonist arrives in the Finnish capital with no lesbian experience. She falls for ten-year-old Piki, “the city's coolest lesbian,” who wears and does what tough men stereotypically do but better (11).¹⁰ Both are diagnosed with serious depression. Like most of their friends, they take medication to treat mental health issues. Oksanen has said that these issues are meant as metaphors for what it is like to be gay in Finland and elsewhere.¹¹ Piki's worsening panic anxiety hinders her from leaving her apartment, except for nighttime reveling in queer bars. Feeling that they are unable to have

regular jobs, the couple start a phone service through which they sell used underwear and other fetish products.

Living the good life from profiting off what they consider to be men's pitiful desires goes well for a couple of years. Piki's deteriorating mental health leads to arguments that end with the protagonist cutting Piki with a knife, depriving her of the finger sensitivity that was key to her lovemaking. After the breakup, the protagonist deceives a man, Joonatan, into making her his stay-at-home partner. She plays the part of a nondepressed heterosexual so that she can avoid work and making decisions: "I whored so that I did not have to wonder if I could take any initiative in any context. For that would require the impossible" (153). She agrees to help Piki commit suicide, but Piki's controlling ex, Bossa, stages Piki's death so that the protagonist is imprisoned for murder. The novel's title references how Bossa uses Piki's disability to control her, a relationship similar to that between two aging sisters in the film *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane* (1962).¹² The novel ends with the protagonist telling her story from prison. Socially isolated, she finally has the distance she desired from the heterosexuals she could not stand, and no one requires her to take initiative.

Critics have been confused by how the story intertwines homosexuality and feminism with depression and insufficient mental health services. Fartein Horgar insists that unless a mental issue is related to being gay, readers should not be told of the characters' sexual orientation. He rejects *Baby Jane* as one-dimensional meaninglessness.¹³ Irmelin Johansson finds Oksanen's social criticism to be less biting—and somewhat confusing—compared to the clearer politics of her other novels.¹⁴ Astrid Claeson concludes that the novel is too shallow to move her, as a consequence of Oksanen's intellectualizing.¹⁵ Other critics are more positive but disagree on what the novel's message is. A common interpretation is that Oksanen attacks how Finland, in the neoliberal era, underfunds mental health services.¹⁶ *Baby Jane's* queer aspects are read as an attack on heteronormativity, or even heterosexuality itself, since the protagonist's relationship to Joonatan is described as unnatural and superficial.¹⁷ Several critics read the couple's sale of underwear as patriarchal-capitalist commodification of the female body.¹⁸ Margareta Wiman accepts Oksanen's explanation of mental issues being a metaphor for gay oppression but therefore rejects the story's dark ending: "What does Sofi Oksanen want us to think? That change is impossible? Or necessary. That sacrifices are unavoidable?" Wiman concludes that after the feminist tour-de-force that was Oksanen's debut novel, *Baby Jane* feels like a political retreat.¹⁹

Applying a queer interpretational metanarrative is,²⁰ in my opinion, key to making sense of the story's suicidal pessimism.²¹ In queer literature, writes Dana Seitler, the suicide plot "performs a fantastic desire to live [a different life. It] manifests a particularly queer form of resistance to

the constraining narratives of life itself, one in which death is . . . an aesthetic model of political possibility.”²² Oksanen utilizes such a strategy—after our era’s implementation of the confluent utopia had revealed its shortcomings—to criticize Western mating, which is a quintessentially queer practice. Jin Haritaworn writes that the main subject matter for queer investigation is the “long globalized, ingredients of the moral panic [from] *failed heterosexuality*,”²³ by which I interpret them to mean the hegemonic mating morality. Connecting mating to political and economic structures is common in this intellectual tradition, as queer theory was a response to “the exponential growth of neoliberal capitalism and globalization.”²⁴ The protagonist’s desire to escape what she terms “all these heteros” is part of a larger criticism for which her devaluation of men can be viewed as a thematic means.²⁵ “Only by running away from their class can women achieve the social contract (that is, a new one),” writes Monique Wittig, “Lesbians are runaways, fugitive slaves.”²⁶

Men thus come to represent the social order itself, making the novel’s misandry political in a manner that points beyond gender. Several critics find the narrator’s dehumanization of men to be the book’s most entertaining parts.²⁷ Frank Hansen writes that, in this pitch-dark story of depression, “the only cheerful point of light is Sofi Oksanen’s grim hatred of men.”²⁸ Witt-Brattström finds in this misandry “a pointed critique of heterosexual men’s incomprehensible and ridiculous sexual desires” but adds, “This is hardly a flattering portrayal of lesbian love.”²⁹ Through giving the narrator-protagonist free rein in spouting misandric rhetoric and subordinating men to women’s needs, Oksanen reveals the moral and practical shortcomings of what I refer to as lesbian heroic love, a supremacist ideology that ends up predominantly harming its adherents. What begins as a way to beat the system turns the protagonist “into a kind of human machine that fulfils her male clients’ sexual fantasies.”³⁰

Oksanen’s despondent narrative aligns with queer theory’s post-2000 “antisocial turn.”³¹ In the queer 1990s, critique had often been directed at suburban suffocation. An artistic trend was to portray LGB communities as pioneers for new family forms and processes of individualization³²—a socially beneficial vanguard that could help liberate everyone from stale heteronormativity and dysfunctional socialites.³³ In *Baby Jane*, urban professionals are no better, and even urban gays can be shallow and despicable. With Nordic gay rights being secured, also the utopia of queer love played itself out, as there existed no enlightened vanguard to lead the way. Oksanen’s oeuvre gives the impression that our political and capitalist structures turn all forms of mating—and sociality in general—into sites of exploitation. Some critics place matriarchal hope in her female characters, concluding that the author “quite evidently finds that women are the bearers of the world men destroy.”³⁴ Clarke, however, reads Oksanen’s

break-through novel *Purge* (*Puhdistus*, 2008)—which was astoundingly successful among readers, critics, and prize juries domestically and abroad—to go beyond groupthink in terms of victim identification. Her literature may caricature Russian men as evil brutes, but she blurs the moral lines also for her female characters. Clarke interprets Oksanen to warn against founding “political community on a shared experience of suffering or persecution which excludes others.”³⁵ A preferable strategy is to create solidarities among different kinds of victims in order to transcend boundaries. Such a system-focused message of inclusion, I argue, can also be found in *Baby Jane*’s pessimistic portrayal of straight and queer dysfunction.

Oksanen depicts our current social order as what Leanne Simpson terms an extraction-assimilation system.³⁶ After the Third Sexual Revolution, queer lifestyles were permitted into the fold, but queer enterprises are, purportedly, only accepted to the extent that they contribute “toward the population’s optimization of life.”³⁷ Profiting off desperate heteromen may feel like sticking it to the patriarchy, but the modern mating regime depends on such transactions to appease marginalized men. Being economically exploited by a lesbian couple is a form of life optimization for those with no better alternatives. In queer fashion, modernity is portrayed as a system in which no one really wins. Reform is not possible, as only rejection can motivate deep enough change. How *Baby Jane* ends with the main characters’ death and imprisonment can be read as a triumph, as “queer theorists have argued that we must somehow disavow the future if we are to resist the normalizing politics of domination that follow in its wake.”³⁸

Relegated to the Sexual Margins

The novel begins on a positive note. Jenny Bergenmar writes that “Piki and the narrator become a couple and share a sense that anything is possible for them, despite their financial difficulties.”³⁹ Their business idea emerges from Piki’s realization of modernity always being short on sex and drugs. Piki’s worsening panic anxiety complicates a continuation of her former work as an amphetamine dealer, so the women decide to combine their talents. Having been a highly successful phone sex operator, Piki has “a divine voice. And I have a divine body” (29). They invent 25-year-old Susanna. She was intended to sell sexualized conversations and faceless photos, but “the first customer immediately asked for underwear . . . Now every other website sells the same products . . . but we were the first and hit straight in the sperm vein” (33). High profits solve their economic problems and ameliorate their depressions. They can afford to partake in society’s material pleasures, spending lavishly like heterosexuals.

Their business is portrayed as clever and subversive. The narrator conveys that male desires are pitiable and heteromen only deserving of

derision. Oksanen uses the women's callousness for comedic effect, only gradually revealing the mutually exploitative nature of their relationship to customers. From a capitalist perspective, selling sex-related services to desperate men can be viewed as contributing to market functionality. Oksanen has made it a main theme of her oeuvre to reveal the large human costs that come with turning sexuality and reproduction into products, portraying how participants on such markets are pushed toward the inhumane. *Norma* (2015) centers on the sale of black-market babies. *The Dog Park* (*Koirapuisto*, 2019) uses egg donation to the fertility industry to exemplify how modern markets commoditize the bodies of women who seek to escape poverty. Oksanen's perspective has been on female suffering, but always with a focus on the systemic mechanisms that impose roles of oppression and victimhood on individuals. In *Purge*, we are given the impression that sex traffickers are evil brutes because that is the behavior their role requires. In Oksanen's portrayal of Eastern European exploitation, there is little room for individual agency among the oppressors.

I find a similar sympathy—or at least understanding or recognition—in *Baby Jane*, beneath the narrator's overt supremacism. The women's incessant dehumanization of the men they live off pushes the reader to question the simplicity of the narrator's perspective. Why do these men spend so much money to be allowed to talk to a woman and to have her send him a product she has worn? Is it really because such men are morally inferior exploiters? Are these interactions best understood as men objectifying women? The queer focus has mostly been on the economic and other marginalization of gays, women, and other groups of nonheterosexual men. *Baby Jane* can be interpreted to portray that even certain groups of heteromen are worthy of inclusion in what Clarke termed a community based "on a shared experience of suffering."⁴⁰

The crude derision of the couple's customers has the potential to make readers think that, for many men, there is an economic price to pay to be allowed to engage women with sexual intent. The Third Sexual Revolution created a golden age of sexual opportunity for high-value men but relegated an increasing number of men to the sexual margins. Confluent love impels everyone, including low-value men, to think of uncommitted sex as an important source of self-realization. Such glorification of casual sex can be a source of great frustration, as a majority of men are mostly excluded from short-term mating—which I return to in Chapter 10. To find an outlet for their short-term desires, low-value men are relegated to commercial markets—what queer theorists might describe as capitalist exploitation—for pornography, sex workers, or buying used underwear from a woman willing to talk to them on the phone.

Instead of being afforded sympathy, such men suffer a devaluation similar to that which befell Norse bachelors—the phenomenon I explored in

Chapter 1. Oksanen conveys such antimale attitudes through the couple's interaction with customers. The women never consider this aspect of their business, at least not in the narration or dialog. They understand men's sexual desperation as testifying to their inferiority. Through staging customer fetishes as increasingly eccentric, the narrator reduces male sexuality to an object of ridicule: "After these telephone conversations, Piki and I would always sit for a long time, holding around each other and laughing" (77).

Sex Objects and Resource Providers

Sanna Karkulehto and Ilmari Leppihalme write that the couple at first find the work amusing, mocking customers and faking lust over the phone.⁴¹ The couple see the comical aspect of selling overpriced underwear to contemptible clients. A similar stance toward men marks much of the narration in Oksanen's oeuvre, making Swedes term her literature "feminist noir."⁴² Life remains good as long as the couple feel that they are generating superprofits from male desire. When they interpret the hours on the phone and creation of fetish products as them beating the system, their outlook is more assimilatory. Piki wants them to have a baby and attempt relative normalcy. Within the queer tradition, such an outcome would typically not be a triumph.⁴³ Oksanen interrupts this progression toward a happy ending of *homonationalism*, the practice of making homotolerance a self-congratulatory part of the national identity.⁴⁴ She intends not to show how Finland has become a queer oasis after the legalization of gay civil unions. Instead of having a baby, the couple are burdened by their fetish work growing more demanding and their relationship disintegrating.

After bruise marks on the protagonist's buttocks reveal that she has had sex with a man, Piki threatens to break off their engagement. Piki's hurt feelings and hatred toward heterosexual men trigger a cascade of slurs. She uses "hetero" as a derogatory term nine times in five lines of text. She spouts the most common negative stereotypes regarding heterosexual men's lack of libidinal prowess. The narrator's affair confirms men's uselessness. Her sex partner was a terrible lay, he bored her, his penis kept falling out, and his dirty talk was incessant and pathetic. She concludes, "If I at least had come once. The fucker was convinced that I had already come many times—for as long as he had been poking me" (126).

As the couple fight, seemingly over an engagement ring, the protagonist cuts Piki's hand. She had described how Piki's fingers symbolize their love connection: "My body began waiting for Piki to put her fingers in me and that they would reach all the way to the bottom of my heart and pull my heart into her hand" (16). With nerves cut, Piki can no longer feel her fingers when they are inside of a woman. She enters into the final stage of her

demise. Piki breaks off their romance but continues the work, which turns increasingly unbearable. The market for fetish products—which they had pioneered—seems to have become more saturated with competition, moving power from seller to buyer. Supremacist exploitation of disempowered men no longer appears like easy money but as mutually exploitative and deceitful market interactions:

Hour after hour, day after day with the same panting. Twenty call to ask about the price, and two of them order. I talk and talk and talk and listen and listen and listen and they want to talk about the weather and reindeer and dicks and the president and the ex-wife and pussy and snow shoveling. And then they get angry when I don't want to talk to them for hours . . . Or they just call again and again and again. They treat me like a free trash can and social worker and therapist. After an hour's nagging and fussing, they may order a package. Or they don't. Some just hang up.

(130)

When Piki trains the protagonist so that also she can contribute on the phone, she conveys insights into how men and women assign each other reductive roles informed by their respective mate preferences. Women play their role as sex objects. Men try to live up to being resource providers.⁴⁵ Both sides deceive the other, as sexual conflict theory would predict.⁴⁶ Piki warns, “Those who brag that money is not a problem never have them, so you don't need to listen too much to their bullshit . . . Those who advertise that they will become repeat customers rarely do” (133). Especially young men never admit to finding a price unreasonable. Many are nervous and put their honor into making a good impression but lack the experience and insights to understand that it works poorly to brag about their looks and penis size, which are of little importance for men reduced to being resource providers.

Piki conveys these dynamics without sympathy for the men who try to fill their assigned role. The men attempt to flirt and make the business relation personal. They lie about being on expensive vacations, being soldiers in war, and whatever they think may elevate their perceived mate value. Piki mocks “those who think wonderful Susanna right after the first conversation wants to move into a one-bedroom by the ocean in [a small town]” (136). She refers to the men as fools. While making sham fetish products for their customers, the women “laughed and giggled all night through” (137).

As the story progresses, Oksanen shows a keen eye for the deception and insecurities that mark modern mating markets. She focuses on a commercial fringe, but similar mechanisms of exploitation and dishonesty drive

other markets, too, also among nonheteros; after all, gays share the same mating psychology, just played out on same-sex markets.⁴⁷ The protagonist muses that being Piki's business partner is a more honest relation than that between Piki and the women she dates now that she is single: "At least I knew where I stood. As opposed to the girl to whom Piki sent text messages" (139). Oksanen exposes how the marketization of mating under the confluent regime drives a commodification of eroticism and romance that alienates people from each other. In this dehumanization, she anchors her queer critique. If a potential partner has something you want, why not deceive them to fulfill your desire? Informed by our current morality, love needs not be a whit different from other market transactions. After Piki breaks up with her, the protagonist enters the heterosexual dating market with a clear goal and few qualms.

Heterosexual Dating Hell

Joonatan seems oddly ignorant of his new girlfriend's interior state and intentions. She lives with him as a fake heterosexual so that she can take long baths as a substitute for lesbian love. In the mornings, she wakes up with Joonatan, but when he leaves for work, she goes back to bed, bathes, or does little:

I went out in the hallway to kiss his cheek, I was cute and half-dressed, a little as if also I had busy mornings. And when the door shut behind him, I ended the morning charade, closed the blinds . . . and sat by the kitchen table slowly smoking a cigarette.

(45)

Oksanen describes in detail how her protagonist puts on makeup, the mask required to pass as one of the normal ones.⁴⁸ Her only important task is to keep herself looking young and pretty. Several critics find this portrayal of male psychology and heterosexual living unconvincing.⁴⁹ Why would Joonatan be content just with having a pretty woman sitting in his apartment smoking all day? Anne Straume emphasizes that we cannot trust the narrator.⁵⁰ The heterosexual dystopia she conveys is her subjective impression. I propose that Oksanen, in this part of the book, lets the protagonist play out her supremacist ideology, her lesbian heroic love, which she adheres to even more strongly after losing Piki. Doubling down on their ideals—their hatred and deceit of men—is the protagonist's connection to the woman she still loves.

The narrator keeps hammering in the point that men and women lack compatibility and that only women can truly be right for each other—similar to what Svedberg's novels argued in the 1960s. The breadwinner-housewife

model ties their relationship to the outdated ideology of romantic love in a manner that makes their heterosexual pair-bond appear vastly inferior. Joonatan is portrayed to have no interest in real intimacy, just shallow sex that is utterly unsatisfying to a woman. The narrator is convinced that only another woman can properly embrace and caress her. Almost everything is wrong with Joonatan, except his ability to provide. The protagonist portrays heterosexual mating as inhumane, symbolically expressed through how its markets consist of interchangeable bodies and faces. As if they lack a proper soul, all men and women on these markets look, smell, and sound the same to her:

If everyone was one and the same, I had no reason to exchange [Joonatan] with someone else. It would require enormous bother. Work. To go out, and even more hetero hell. To keep in touch. Calling and dating. To tell about myself. Conversations. Endless work. And the end result would be entirely the same. And if not the same, then just as meaningful. Just as meaningless.

(59)

The protagonist perceives her dark worldview to be motivated by her persisting love for Piki. I interpret Piki to symbolize queer pessimism for the viability of the current social order. In Finnish, the name references “blackness.”⁵¹ In the novel’s final part, both women get to realize their dark desires. When critics complain that the story ends too depressingly, they do not consider the queer nature of *Baby Jane*’s critique. The fact that the protagonist wants to escape people and having to take initiative makes prison preferable to heteroassimilation. Piki appears to be meant to die, as she symbolizes the impossibility of a solution.⁵² From this perspective, *Baby Jane* ends in moral triumph. The former couple get to live up to the ideals of their ideology, as they accept the consequences of how they perceive the world to be. Within their moral universe, dying and social isolation are sane responses to modern madness. To offer readers additional insights into this logic, Oksanen makes the women’s ideology of lesbian heroic love even darker as she builds toward Piki’s suicide.

The protagonist concludes that all men could be pathetic fetish customers. Learning that one of Joonatan’s friends had been a client, one who always ordered red underwear with sperm, she loses her ability to distinguish between types of men. Joonatan refers to this friend as “entirely normal.” The protagonist rummages through Joonatan’s apartment looking for fetish products, dreading to learn that also he had been a client: “Any man who came my way could be one. I did not like the thought.” The idea of her heteropartner having masturbated while listening to Piki’s

voice “was ridiculous and depressing, but so grotesque that I could not forget it.” She begins crying after sex. The narrator shares that she can only copulate with Joonatan if she uses lubrication, which she does without him noticing: “I whored because Joonatan took care of everything. And I did not have to do more than take him in my mouth sufficiently often, and neither with this did he expect me to take the initiative” (151–3).

Piki refers to Joonatan as “the government” (155). The moniker supports my interpretation of men representing the social order within the women’s queer metanarrative. Piki has quit her medication, but the world looks the same. She has stopped going to bars and no longer desires new partners. More than anything, she and the protagonist feel “so unspeakably tired” (165). Oksanen juxtaposes Piki’s journey toward nonexistence with the protagonist’s middle-class suffocation, using a meal as a metaphor:

The quail was breaded with almonds and saffron. The bones were so small and there were so many of them that it was difficult to eat, and all the time it felt as if I had fishbones in my throat.

(174)

Piki begins a weeks-long countdown to her suicide. How this process ends leaves no illusions to cling to for those who had hoped that queer love and lifestyles could be an alternative to heterosexual dysfunction.

Bossa, to whom Piki had a one-year relationship prior to meeting the protagonist, seems to murder Piki as Piki is about to kill herself. Throughout the novel, Bossa has grocery-shopped, done laundry, and run the errands that Piki’s panic anxiety disincentivizes her from doing. Bossa does this to control her ex. She starves Piki toward the end, deliberately not dropping off the food on which she depends. This is not Bossa’s first anti-social behavior, as she had pulled one of Piki’s former girlfriends along the asphalt by her hair. Oksanen portrays several queer characters in unflattering manners, conveying that the dysfunction she criticizes is primarily human, not hetero. Out of what we can assume is jealousy, Bossa arranges her murder of Piki so that the protagonist gets convicted for it. Clearly, these women are no moral vanguard.

Oksanen offers no hope, only critique. The queer vanguard may be *enlightened* in terms of understanding what is wrong with society, but their outlook is better understood as *endarkened*. Piki embodies this endarkenment, to which her name attests. The panic anxiety that had hindered her from leaving her apartment can be read as her—“the city’s coolest lesbian” (11)—having internalized the unviability of submitting to hegemonic morality. The fact that her anxiety had not hindered her from being a social butterfly in queer bars supports my interpretation. After seven years as Piki’s protégé, the protagonist has internalized her pessimism. As the

novel ends, her desire is not to get out of her depression but to let it fill her completely, as she wants to be endarkened like Piki. Being locked up and isolated fulfills this desire: “Now also I am in prison. A bit different than yours, but a prison nonetheless. Maybe I will soon understand. Maybe I will become closer to you than I ever have been” (189).

A \$6000-a-Year Tinder Tax

With this ending, the heroic lesbians end up dead or in prison. The heterosexuals still reproduce and eat quail. Critics were confused; several deemed *Baby Jane* to be Oksanen’s weakest work. What point was she trying to make? To me, her queer indictment appears all-encompassing. Oksanen attacks central aspects of modernity through staging how market logic has invaded even our most intimate spheres, making us dehumanize each other. The narrator’s hatred of men and heterosexuality should be understood in this context. From an evolutionary perspective, the author aims well. How societies organize mating is the foundation upon which everything else rests. Queer theory and the evolutionary sciences are rarely thought of as congruent, but how the queer field centers on “failed heterosexuality”⁵³ speaks to a deep understanding of the importance of mating for how we structure our societies. If our grievance is with aspects of modernity, philosophical combat is not irrelevant, but such thinking is but the upper floor of a building whose foundation is our mating practices.

Oksanen’s intention seems to be to undermine her readers’ faith in the naturalness of confluent ideals, especially those that drive the marketization of mating. Tightening the screw of competition harms everyone but those at the top. Women may be objectified, but most men are not patriarchal beneficiaries of today’s regime. In Chapter 1, I made the same point with regard to elites and regular Norsemen, as *men* are hardly to blame for anything. With strong stratification, a growing number of men are marginalized. In 2023, Tinder launched a new premium membership for \$6000 a year.⁵⁴ Such fees are another tax on men trying to keep up with increasing competition. How much harder should we ask men to compete? How much resources should men and women have to allocate to find someone with whom to pair-bond? For individuals, it may make sense to keep raising the stakes in order to keep up; after all, mating is a central part of life. For societies, sexual competition quickly becomes maladaptive;⁵⁵ we gain little from making it harder to form relationships; quite the contrary—we become more miserable and give up.⁵⁶ We did not evolve to be assiduous partner seekers, as *Homo* parents used to arrange our relationships.⁵⁷

Baby Jane insightfully conveys how also men suffer. My reading aligns with Clarke's understanding of Oksanen offering a "complex and subtle representation of victimhood."⁵⁸ Her oeuvre is full of clichés, writes Anna Mrozewicz, but she uses these "in order to challenge them in a subversive fashion."⁵⁹ When *Baby Jane*'s narrator portrays heterosexual men as subhuman, this at first entertains—at least several critics concluded as much. As the story progresses, readers gain deeper insights into the mutually exploitative relationship between buyers and sellers on commercial sex markets. Oksanen's critique is not directed at individual men but at the structures that pressure the sexes into dehumanizing each other.

What I term lesbian heroic love is not offered as a replacement for confluent love but as an attitude that illuminates dysfunction. Oksanen does not encourage women to be supremacists who live off the desires of men. Unlike some earlier queer authors, such as Svedberg,⁶⁰ Oksanen argues not that same-sex relationships are superior for living up to confluent ideals. She portrays how both straight and gay suffer under the current regime. What the solution could be she does not even engage, as that is not the queer approach. I draw from *Baby Jane* what Clarke did from *Purge*, that Oksanen warns against forming community around shared victimhood in a manner that excludes others. Piki and the protagonist did this to their own detriment, ending up so alienated from—and despising—the general population that their own death and imprisonment felt like a moral triumph. *Baby Jane* shows how hegemonic morality harms everyone. To move toward a new morality, solidarity between groups is offered as a better strategy than to invert supremacist structures so that they form symmetries with oppressions of the past.

Whether men or women are more victimized by modern mating is a central question for my final case studies. The TV series *Sigurd Can't Get Laid* (2020–2022) stages the tribulations of the lowest-value men, so-called incels (involuntary celibate), who are excluded from short- and long-term mating. Such men became infamous in the 2010s after terrorist attacks that claimed dozens of lives.⁶¹ Amanda Romare portrays another group that is marginalized by modern mating to be more deserving of sympathy. *Half of Malmö Consists of Guys Who Dumped Me* (2021) dramatizes the plight of involuntary single women, whom I term *insings*. Tinder and other modern mating arenas offer women practically limitless access to dating and sex with higher-value men, but the accumulation of such experiences makes it challenging for some women to transition to dating strategies that are more likely to lead to pair-bonding. *Sigurd* and *Half of Malmö* offer insights into why an increasing number of men and women are opting out of short- and long-term mating.

Notes

- 1 Buss, "Sexual Conflict in Human Mating."
- 2 "Queer" denotes sexual and gender identities that do not correspond with heterosexual norms. The term is also used to describe a perspective that goes against hegemonic norms and values.
- 3 David Williams, "Sofi Oksanen's *Purge*: Trafficking the Suffering of Others?" *World Literature Today* 88.6 (2014): 48–52.
- 4 Ebba Witt-Brattström, "The Dark History in Sofi Oksanen's Writing," *The Nordic History of Women's Literature*, December 1, 2014, <https://nordicwomensliterature.net/2014/12/01/the-dark-history-in-sofi-oksanens-writing/>.
- 5 Williams, "Sofi Oksanen's *Purge*," 51.
- 6 David Clarke, "The Representation of Victimhood in Sofi Oksanen's Novel *Purge*," *Journal of European Studies* 45.3 (2015): 220–35, 220.
- 7 I got to experience Jack Halberstam when he held a guest lecture at UCLA in 2018. He seemed to get quite a few students somewhat on board with the necessity of tearing down all of societies' structures, by which he meant *all*, including hospitals, police, fire departments, the military, grocery stores—everything, the sooner the better. Once all that was left were bonfires around which we would eat and play music, we could consider which much better world we wanted to build. A student raised her hand and asked if not half of those people too would be Trump voters. This realization dampened the students' enthusiasm for Halberstam's queer utopia.
- 8 Jenny Björklund, *Lesbianism in Swedish Literature: An Ambiguous Affair* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*.
- 9 Björklund, *Lesbianism in Swedish Literature*, 86.
- 10 My translation of *Baby Jane* into English is from the Norwegian edition; Oksanen, *Baby Jane*.
- 11 Margareta Wiman, "En reträtt som är tärande att läsa," *Östgöta Correspondenten*, October 16, 2008, <https://corren.se/kultur/kultur-och-noje/artikel/en-retratt-som-ar-tarande-att-lasa/r98848vj>.
- 12 Kaisa Kurikka made an adaptation study of the 1962 film and the 1960 novel it builds on, plus Oksanen's novel and its 2019 film adaptation. She cites Lorena Russell, who reads the 1962 camp classic to be about "monstrous femininity," constructing its horrors from the women's aging bodies, which repulse heteronormative desires. Oksanen's women are young and attractive but promote a supremacist ideology that could be read as a form of "monstrous femininity"; Kaisa Kurikka, "In-Between *Baby Janes*: From Book to Film to Book to Film," *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema* 11.1 (2021): 75–87.
- 13 Fartein Horgar, "Og så da?" *Adresseavisen*, February 28, 2011, 8.
- 14 Irmelin Johansson, "Reseptbelagt kjærlighet – en anmeldelse av *Baby Jane*," *Bøysen* 23.2–3 (2011): 224–7.
- 15 Astrid Claeson, "Intressant författare som skjuter bredvid målet," *Upsala Nya Tidning*, October 2, 2008, B7.
- 16 Krisztina Karizs and Laura Bába, "Bodily Representations of the Shame of Inferiority in Sofi Oksanen's Novels," *Acta ethnographica Hungarica* 61.2 (2016): 367–80; Kurikka, "In-Between *Baby Janes*."
- 17 Sanna Karkulehto, "Sukupuoli, seksuaalisuus ja valta," in Mika Hallila, Yrjö Hosiaisuoma, Sanna Karkulehto, Leena Kirstinä, and Jussi Ojajärvi, eds., *Suomen nykykirjallisuus 2: Kirjallinen elämä ja yhteiskunta*, 109–23

- (Helsinki: SKS, 2013); Sara Meidell, "Riktad attack mot heterosamhället," *Västerbottens-Kuriren*, December 29, 2008, 26.
- 18 Jenny Bergenmar, "Vulnerability and Disability in Contemporary Nordic Literature: Linn Ullmann's *Grace* and Sofi Oksanen's *Baby Jane*," in Adriana Margareta Dancus, Mats Hyvönen, and Maria Karlsson, eds., *Vulnerability in Scandinavian Art and Culture*, 151–71 (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Kurikka, "In-Between *Baby Janes*."
 - 19 Wiman, "En reträtt som är tärande att läsa."
 - 20 In an earlier note, I defined a "metanarrative" as "an overall account of things that enables people to find belief, pattern, and meaning in their experiences." Literary critics use "interpretational metanarratives" as a lens through which they analyze stories. Each such narrative comes with distinct values, tools, focuses, and blind spots. They can be postmodern, psychoanalytic, queer, evolutionary, systems-theoretical, etc. An evolutionary literary critic might tell you that the main advantage with evolutionary frameworks is that they are derived from empirical science, not just, say, made up by a chain-smoking Frenchman who developed a pessimistic attitude after a few tough years in the 1960s (such debates tend to suffer from similarly sardonic arguments). Although evolutionary hypotheses rely on insights from empirical science—in addition to evolutionary hypotheses not yet empirically substantiated—what we do is *not* empirical science; there exists no method for testing the validity of our literary readings, no more than you can test the precision of claims from a queer critic. Conceivably, a capable critic could generate valuable insights through applying an astrological meta-narrative in their reading of a text—especially if the author had infused the story with astrological imagination. In this monograph, I rely on the evolutionary metanarrative because I find it especially suited for studying mating and cultural change across vast spans of time.
 - 21 It might seem odd that I, as an evolutionary literary critic, would apply queer theory to interpret a novel. Queer scholars tend to view evolutionary theory as reductive and essentializing. Evolutionary scholars tend not to be any more positively inclined toward queer theory. I propose that it is beneficial to view both schools of thought as offering interpretational metanarratives that bring our attention to different aspects of a fictional text. I treat the evolutionary narrative as if it encompasses all other metanarratives. The evolutionary perspective offers insights into human predispositions and our deepest drives. On top of these are layers and layers of culture, one of which, occasionally, is queer ideology. Because Oksanen wrote *Baby Jane* in the queer tradition, it is imperative that I am familiar with this tradition in order to interpret her work. Then, at a deeper level, I use evolutionary frameworks to untangle why her characters act as they do with regard to mating, sexual conflict, etc.
 - 22 Dana Seidler, "Suicidal Tendencies: Notes toward a Queer Narratology," *GLQ* 25.4 (2019): 599–616, 602.
 - 23 Jin Haritaworn, *Queer Lovers and Hateful Others: Regeneration Violent Times and Places* (London: Pluto Press, 2015), 9. My emphasis.
 - 24 David V. Ruffolo, *Post-Queer Politics* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009), 36.
 - 25 Oksanen, *Baby Jane*, 176.
 - 26 Monique Wittig, "The Social Contract," in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, 33–45 (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 45.
 - 27 Anne Cathrine Straume, "Tøff og trist," NRK, March 9, 2011, <https://www.nrk.no/kultur/baby-jane-1.7539061>.
 - 28 Frank Sebastian Hansen, "Piki-misundelse," *Ekstra Bladet*, March 4, 2012, 40.

- 29 Witt-Brattström, “The Dark History in Sofi Oksanen’s Writing.”
- 30 Kurikka, “In-Between *Baby Janes*,” 84.
- 31 Elahe Haschemi Yekani, Eveline Kilian, and Beatrice Michaelis, “Introducing Queer Futures,” in Elahe Haschemi Yekani, Eveline Kilian, and Beatrice Michaelis, eds., *Queer Futures: Reconsidering Ethics, Activism, and the Political* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2017), 1–15.
- 32 In the 1990s, the common acronym for queer communities included only three letters; <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/from-lgbt-to-lgbtqia-the-evolving-recognition-of-identity>.
- 33 Mads Larsen, “Postmodern Queering of Family in *101 Reykjavik*,” *Journal of Family History* 48.4 (2023): 470–87.
- 34 Witt-Brattström, “The Dark History in Sofi Oksanen’s Writing.”
- 35 Clarke, “The Representation of Victimhood,” 220.
- 36 Haritaworn, *Queer Lovers and Hateful Others*, 27.
- 37 Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (New York: Duke University Press, 2017), xxxv.
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- 46 Buss, “Sexual Conflict in Human Mating.”
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- 55 Buss, *When Men Behave Badly*.
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10 Incels & Insings

Marginalized Men and Women in *Sigurd* and *Half of Malmö* (2020s)

In the 2020s, it feels like—at least to many—as if, any day, our world could fall apart. We realize that the modern world was built on an ideological foundation ill-suited for central aspects of human nature and culture.¹ The master-narrative of liberal humanism convinced cosmopolitan elites that all the world's peoples longed to live in Western-style democracies.² After the Cold War, our social order was to become ubiquitous, but, for two decades, democracy has been in decline.³ Westerners, too, are losing faith in the story that united their communities, causing their nation's social fiber to dissolve, a process that is most visible in the United States. Our mating ideology seems also to have revealed its shortcomings. Adhering to confluent love has not been an unmitigated boon. Women and men are hardly living their best lives. Many find dating more and more dysfunctional and mating less attractive.⁴ Individual choice feels like the only moral option, but individuals are increasingly unable to find someone with whom to bond.⁵ Across the developed world, fertility rates are plummeting, a process that, over the next generations, will dramatically age our populations and threaten human well-being.⁶ Again, storytellers are trying to make sense of contemporary malaise—with Scandinavian fiction at the forefront.

Sigurd and Amanda are the respective protagonists of this chapter's two case studies. Both are traumatized by today's mating markets but face different challenges. Sigurd is a 25-year-old virgin. He never met a girl who was interested in him, erotically or romantically, and he fears that he never will. Amanda also wants to pair-bond. When she is 31 years old, she embarks on a journey of serial dating to find someone with whom to share her life. Acquiring sex is not the problem; quite the contrary—it is mostly what she is offered. Amanda dates a line of attractive men who know how to charm a date and often are good at sex. But not a single one invites her for a second date. Like Sigurd, Amanda suffers a downward spiral of depression from constantly being rejected. She does her best on each date, feels that she connects well with the men, and offers sex so that they can

get to know each other intimately. Instead of becoming pair-bonded, she develops a Tinder addiction. Serial dating makes her suffer increasingly intense sexual regret. On her deathbed, Amanda concludes, her primary remorse will be that she had sex with too many men. She cannot comprehend why not a single one of them is interested in a relationship. Are all men exploitative “douches,” she wonders, who only want sex but not commitment? Her female circle of friends mostly suffers similar fates: they have abundant access to dating and sex with attractive men, yet remain insings (involuntary singles).

In the 2010s, men like Sigurd—incels⁷—became an object of derision and hate. Incel terrorists murdered over 50 people across the West. The online incel community comprises hundreds of thousands of men infamous for the misogyny common in their forums.⁸ Being denied copulation and pair-bonding, many turn their frustration toward women and society. Sigurd is not a dangerous misogynist, nor are most incels; in fact, research suggests that incels have fewer violent and sexually aggressive proclivities than other men.⁹ Of those who participate in online forums, only around 10% resort to misogynistic rhetoric.¹⁰ For the hate speech that does exist, it is unclear to what extent it is performative or expresses a genuine hatred of women.¹¹ Moreover, most involuntary celibate men do not seek online fellowship with other incels. They go about their lives like everyone else, but suffer what moral philosopher Joonas Räsänen terms “sexual loneliness.”¹²

As this study has explored, being excluded from mating has been a common experience for *Homo* males, as we have twice as many female as male ancestors.¹³ Promiscuous and polygynous mating have channeled copulation and pair-bonding only to a proportion of men. The medieval Church’s imposition of lifelong monogamy was an anomaly that contributed to an exceptional level of sexual egalitarianism under the EMP. Later, as the romantic regime peaked after World War II, nearly everyone married.¹⁴ After the Third Sexual Revolution, Western mating took a sharp turn. Individual choice, gender equality, economic prosperity, and the contraceptive pill empower women to pursue the men that arouse them the most. As a consequence of this newfound freedom, an increasing number of the lowest-value men are excluded from short- and long-term mating.¹⁵ A small proportion of the most attractive men hoard a growing proportion of sexual opportunity, a stratification amplified by dating apps.¹⁶ The result is dysfunctional for large population groups and society. Increasing singledom and sexual inactivity detract from people’s well-being.¹⁷ A reduction in pair-bonding contributes to a decrease in fertility that will age our populations so drastically that some consider this to be our era’s gravest threat to civilization.¹⁸

But why do we mate so dysfunctionally? Evolutionary psychologist Menelaos Apostolou proposes that mismatch explains some of the

malaise.¹⁹ Male and female mating psychologies evolved under regimes with varying extents of parental choice. Most men are not particularly arousing courters, as our mate-seeking male ancestors mostly were evaluated by different criteria. Similarly, women frequently fail to pursue mating strategies that align with their goals; they can be confused by the differing dynamics of short- and long-term markets; and can fail at assessing their own mate value and the intentions of men who court them. As I explored in Chapter 6, women seem to have developed an overly strong attraction to men whose good looks, or other compelling traits, signal genetic quality—to counter how parents downplayed such traits when selecting mates for their daughters.²⁰ Mismatch, conflicting desires, and general confusion regarding a uniquely novel mating regime explain much of the incel and insing phenomena.

For the few men who master modern dating, having a high number of sex partners can be rewarding; as David Buss writes, “Men have evolved a powerful desire for sexual access to a variety of women.”²¹ As our female ancestors faced different evolutionary pressures from those of men, women generally find promiscuous mating less rewarding.²² Early hominins did not expect more than copulation, but around 4 million years of pair-bonding have shaped *Homo* emotions. People mostly express a desire for long-term commitment and tend to be happier when coupled up.²³ The Third Sexual Revolution may have provided women with near limitless opportunity for sex with high-value men, but they are often left sexually unsatisfied and with negative emotions and regret.²⁴ This point, however, should not be exaggerated. A trope in evolutionary research used to be that women were coy and uninterested in promiscuity.²⁵ We now have a more complex understanding.²⁶ For the women whose genuine preference is promiscuous mating, today’s markets confer an exceptional level of privilege in terms of access to higher-value men. Some women happily and without harm take advantage of this; research has established that the persistent stereotype of promiscuous women suffering from low self-esteem is unfounded.²⁷ But since women in general are more oriented toward committed relationships, promiscuity is for many a poor replacement for pair-bonding.²⁸

Both insings and incels are negative externalities of modern mating. While incels have become a part of pop culture and are being studied by a growing number of scholars,²⁹ insings only recently emerged as a media phenomenon. Female scholars and intellectuals demand attention to how today’s mating practices also marginalize women.³⁰ In her partly autobiographical *Half of Malmö Consists of Guys Who Dumped Me* (*Halva Malmö består av killar som dumpat mig*, 2021; hereafter *Half of Malmö*), Amanda Romare (1989–) offers an honest, gut-wrenching portrayal of insing victimization. The Swedish novel inspired a rich debate

through which women spoke up about their mating struggles. Anna Axfors writes,

Women are disadvantaged on today's dating market, according to the sociologist Eva Illouz. Which is cool, for you think that it should be the opposite, considering how much incels complain. But exactly like men still have the economic power, they have the relational power because they have more choices and not as high expectations.³¹

Romare, too, rejects the claim that women have more power on mating markets: "I find the opposite. My impression is that guys more often swipe right on Tinder, meaning that guys are more interested in getting a first date, but when it comes to second and third dates, they withdraw."³² She has had enough of incels getting all the attention: "Yet again men have made everything be about them, but there are many lonely women out there that no one is talking about."³³ Attacking the incel discourse, Björn Barr refers to it as a "murderous conspiracy" when men claim to be sexually excluded.³⁴

The Norwegian TV series *Sigurd Can't Get Laid* (*Sigurd får ikke pult*, 2020–2022; hereafter *Sigurd*) triggered the expression of similar views. Aurora Nossen finds its title to degrade women and promote the idea that men are entitled to sex.³⁵ Gry Rustad insists that the title is misguided since the incel protagonist's problem has to be depression and not celibacy. We should take struggling men seriously, she writes, but to connect their problems "to a lack of sex only contributes to toxic masculinity."³⁶ Not all attention was negative toward incels. The ensuing debate suggests that some cultures, perhaps especially the progressive Scandinavian ones, are ready to investigate mating stratification more soberly.³⁷ Hammer,³⁸ Kamran,³⁹ Krogh and Choi,⁴⁰ and Stavik⁴¹ all encourage that people try to garner greater sympathy for struggling young men, but their opinion pieces do not dig deeper into the mechanisms that contribute to male marginalization.

In this chapter, I apply sexual strategies theory, sexual conflict theory, evolutionary mismatch theory, and other frameworks from evolutionary psychology to investigate several dysfunctional and maladaptive aspects of today's mating practices, which are insightfully portrayed in *Half of Malmö* and *Sigurd*.⁴² Applying these tools in the analysis of my two fictional case studies helps me illuminate how the incel and insing phenomena are related. My primary concern is to investigate the struggles of insings, as these have been under-researched. The portmanteau "insing" exists on the internet, but in many mating debates, including those around *Half of Malmö*, such women have been referred to as "female incels (femcels),"⁴³ a term that does not describe their challenges. Although women

have a power advantage on short-term markets that gives them abundant access to male sexuality, the complexity of female mate preferences makes this only a theoretical advantage for some women. Involuntary celibate women exist, but this chapter does not investigate them. Romare has been uncomfortable referring to herself as a femcel, which she has done due to a lack of more descriptive terms.⁴⁴ I therefore propose the term insings for women with easy access to dating and sex but who are unable to fulfill their expressed desire for a pair-bond. Insights from this analysis could be of help, especially for the women who struggle in today's mating markets.

30,000 Swipes Away from Mating

Sigurd's four seasons chronicle its protagonist's journey away from being a socially isolated, depressed incel. Sigurd loses his virginity at the end of season 2, explores the challenges of pair-bonding in season 3, and becomes a somewhat capable courter of women in season 4. The series ends with him being pair-bonded with a woman who bears his child. Especially season 1 was critically praised for exploring a sensitive and controversial topic in a funny, accessible way. The series was compared to *Seinfeld* for its awkward everyday comedy,⁴⁵ and Woody Allen's films for its existential take on sex.⁴⁶ A newspaper for urbanites awarded season 1 "TV Series of the Year."⁴⁷

Sigurd (Steinar Klouman Hallert) lacks much of what attracts women to a man, especially on short-term markets. He is not good looking, has low self-esteem, few material resources, and a small social circle. His poor social skills, especially his shy awkwardness, are a particular burden in the modern mating regime of individual choice.⁴⁸ Had he lived centuries earlier, someone with his traits, skills, and social standing would still have had low mate value, but due to a higher marriage rate, such men had a better chance of securing a long-term pair-bond. Sigurd's parents would likely have arranged a marriage to a woman whom they thought was a suitable match. Today, men like him often suffer involuntary celibacy because they avoid, or fail at, the social interactions that typically lead to copulation and pair-bonding.

In the first episode, Sigurd's dramaturgic call to action occurs when he realizes just how low of a mate value women assign him and how low his quality of life will be if he remains unable to attract a partner. In his job as a mobile phone repairer, he misinterprets a female customer's social niceties. Unlike women, men commonly overperceive signals of interest.⁴⁹ When Sigurd suggests that he could return the phone to her in a bar where they can drink beer, she angrily reports him to his colleague. That someone with such miniscule mate value would consider her a potential mate seems to make graver the affront. Sigurd's female colleague salvages the

situation. When he asks how she pulled that off, the colleague admits, “I said you were retarded.”⁵⁰ Crestfallen, Sigurd concludes that him expressing romantic interest to a woman would only be acceptable if he suffered intellectual disability. The scene conveys how women are incentivized to reject low-value men in a manner that imposes pain on them in order to encourage more adaptive behavior. The woman’s seemingly cruel rejection ends up having this effect on Sigurd. He realizes that his current self appears erotically and romantically worthless to the vast majority of women.⁵¹

The protagonist embarks on a journey of transformation to increase his own mate value. The series’ creators emphasize how extraordinarily challenging this can be. No change of attitude or strategies are likely to have a short-term effect. Sigurd fears that he is headed for a life without intimacy, or even friendships, with women. Like with many incels, his focus on sex is mostly because sexual activity is the first step toward pair-bonding. In the West—and especially in Scandinavia—the short-term market is the entry point to the long-term one. A man who cannot get laid is unlikely to ever get the chance to demonstrate his boyfriend qualities.

Sigurd at first adopts the deterministic beliefs common in incel forums: that genetics are so important that certain men have no chance at becoming sexually active or pair-bonded.⁵² Incel narratives are often products of inflexible, superficial use of insights from the evolutionary sciences,⁵³ which are construed so that they justify giving up on mating.⁵⁴ While their approach lacks scientific rigor, some of their conclusions are relevant at a group level. An incel, like Sigurd, can overcome his weaknesses and achieve mating success, but the bottom quartile of men will remain the bottom quartile.

Sigurd frees himself from incel pessimism after meeting a *doppelgänger* whose social skills attract women. This man used to be an incel but succeeded in transforming himself. He advises Sigurd:

Men like us can’t just wank off all life. We must have sex, right? . . . The old me [was also a gamer]. I am no longer that person. I have grown up. People like that don’t get laid.⁵⁵

Inspired, Sigurd signs up for Tinder, the app that has come to symbolize our era’s new dating practices.

Apostolou’s work on mismatch informs why Sigurd is unlikely to succeed on Tinder,⁵⁶ which predominantly distributes casual sex. Before the Second Sexual Revolution, there was less pressure on men for having attractive looks and good flirting skills. This past of arranged marriages seems to inform why most men lack the ability to attract women on short-term markets. David Buss proposes that 20% of men are sufficiently attractive to

succeed with short-term mating.⁵⁷ This has been the common assumption in the field, that the typical 20:80 Pareto distribution informs casual sex markets. The longitudinal study of Harper et al. indicates that this stratification is becoming stronger.⁵⁸ From 2002 to 2011–2013, the top 5% of men increased their number of sex partners by 32%. An equivalent reduction in sex partners occurred among the lower-value men. Norwegian studies attest to a similar stratification.⁵⁹ A 2015 study had supported the assumption that there is a 20:80 distribution among men on Tinder,⁶⁰ but this might no longer to be the case. In 2014, men swiped right about three times as often as women did, 46 and 14%, respectively.⁶¹ In 2021, this discrepancy had increased to an order of magnitude: 53 versus 5%.⁶² Neyt et al. found similar numbers: 62 and 4.5%.⁶³ Even the dating app Hinge, designed to be more equitable, channels 41% of women's likes to the top 5% of men, while the bottom 50% receive 4%.⁶⁴

Sigurd's chances on Tinder are small, as is the case for most men. The series' creators emphasize how powerless low-value men are by having Sigurd's first match be part of a scam that ends with him being robbed.⁶⁵ For men of average attractiveness, studies show that they must spend an extraordinary amount of time swiping to earn dates or mating opportunities. One study found that the median man must swipe 100 times to get one match.⁶⁶ Another study found that 57 matches are required for one meetup and that around five meetups are required for sex or a relationship to be the likely outcome.⁶⁷ These studies approach Tinder data differently, so combining their findings is statistically questionable. Yet, how their data suggest that the median man must swipe through almost 30,000 female profiles to achieve short- or long-term mating, tells us that—for most men—Tinder is an ineffective arena.⁶⁸

Such odds make Sigurd embrace his incel status at the end of season 1. He participates in a public event as one of four anonymized incels. Upon them is imposed the only cultural script that exists for such men, as angry misogynists against whom society must protect itself. The fact that modern mating markets drive women increasingly to discriminate such men is not entertained; the men themselves are to blame. An expert proclaims to the audience: "No wonder they haven't had sex when they have been inside all life gaming. What these guys need is a year in the military."⁶⁹ A female audience member asks, "Why are you so angry? Do you feel that the world owes you something?"⁷⁰ The men reject feeling angry, but no one cares. A Norwegian incel study found the same, that the interviewees who were excluded from mating did not feel anger toward women or society. Having the incel stereotype imposed on them only made their marginalization feel worse.⁷¹ Throughout *Sigurd*, unsympathetic characters explain the incel phenomenon as a product of some men's excessive time use on computer games. Audiences are encouraged to adopt a more

nuanced understanding of why an increasing number of men are excluded from short- and long-term mating.

After working on his looks and social skills, and suffering numerous failures, Sigurd gets to copulate for the first time after a date at the end of season 2. Season 3 explores how women's exclusion of low-value men from short-term markets contributes to dysfunction on long-term markets. Sigurd pair-bonds with Josefin (Erika Edvardsson) with whom he envisions a future. Since he feels that women, until now, have deprived him of sex, he does not consider it immoral to cheat on his first ever girlfriend. He explains to his friend Mats (Erlend Mørch) that men have always offered Josefin sex, while "only now people have become interested in having sex with me . . . It is so incredibly unfair that I have to stop because she is satisfied. I have to grab the opportunities I have."⁷² He reminds Josefin that she has "had 15 boyfriends [and also] slept around."⁷³ Having had three sex partners, Sigurd feels that he "cannot grow old and have had sex with [so few.]"⁷⁴ Strong stratification between men makes it so that probably most relationships will be like that of Sigurd and Josefin, in that the woman will be the most sexually experienced. Considering men's sexual jealousy,⁷⁵ their greater desire for partner variety,⁷⁶ and how confluent love promotes causal sex as an important source of self-realization,⁷⁷ our era's mating stratification could contribute to greater friction within relationship.

Josefin becomes furious when Sigurd admits to having cheated. She refuses to sympathize with his sexual marginalization, and he cares not that she has suffered similar trauma as Amanda in *Half of Malmö*. Josefin had admitted regarding her former boyfriends: "I find an asshole, then we break up, and then I find a new asshole. Are you an asshole?"⁷⁸ She agreed to pair-bond with Sigurd because he is not. By "asshole," she seems to mean a high-value man who mates long- and short-term at the same time. Josefin exemplifies the burden that can befall women who get to pair-bond with the most sought-after mates. Men with sexual opportunity typically become more short-term-oriented,⁷⁹ which can motivate them to cheat even after having agreed to being in a closed relationship.

Sigurd's girlfriend had not been an insing. Attractive men pair-bonded with her, but their cheating caused her to adjust the value she assigns different partner traits, further upvaluing men who convincingly signal long-term commitment. She makes this point when she throws Sigurd out of her life: "The whole point of you is that you don't do things like that! If I am to have a boyfriend who fucks others, he might as well be good-looking." Sigurd ignores her admission, insisting on the greater relevance of his own victimhood: "I'm so damned tired of relating to a fucking whore. You fucked so much that it gets stuck in my throat. You have to listen to me."⁸⁰ Since none of them is willing to listen to, or sympathize with, the other's mating challenges, their relationship ends.

Sigurd must make a potentially life-defining decision. He desires to accumulate sexual experience with additional partners but doubts whether he will be able to do so to an extent that justifies the effort. Mats encourages him to mimic the behavior of men who are so attractive that they can have a relationship and also sleep around. Peter Jonason and David Buss account for how such men adopt tactics that let them avoid burdensome entanglements that could hinder their short-term strategies. With high access to new partners, high-value men “can afford to keep relationships purely casual more than can those lower in mate-value.”⁸¹ Sigurd concludes that his mate value could never become high enough to support such a strategy, as he does not “feel that he is that kind of guy.”⁸² This realization, that he will never be attractive enough to have significant success on short-term markets, makes him submit to a long-term orientation. His decision exemplifies how mating stratification can have a positive effect on pair-bonding. Low-value men can become more motivated to commit, as they lack sexual opportunity outside of relationships. In his next pair-bond, Sigurd accepts that the cost of long-term intimacy and family life is to forego short-term opportunities—even if it feels unfair that such restrictions are placed on men with low short-term mate value.

Serial Dating as Self-Harm

The *Half of Malmö*-protagonist’s journey from being an insing to being pair-bonded mirrors that of the author. When Amanda Romare turned 30, “she started serial dating, using both the Tinder app and analogue bar hookups, thinking 5–6 dates would suffice to find someone with whom she could spend a considerable part of her life.”⁸³ Two years later, she had had sex with so many men, she writes in the novel, that this would be the primary regret on her deathbed.⁸⁴ She felt sexually exploited by men who showed no interest in fulfilling her desire for a pair-bond.

Sexual strategies theory posits that the discordant pressures on hominin males and females explain why men and women pursue different strategies for short- and long-term mating, some of which incentivize intersex cooperation while others drive competition.⁸⁵ When Romare experienced postcoital regret, she had fallen prey to the short-term strategies of sexually attractive men. Tinder and the urban bar scene gave her access to the most compelling men, but only for casual sex. The men’s short-term orientation, and her relatively lower long-term mate value, made pair-bonding an unlikely outcome. Her strategies could also make her come across as short-term-oriented. In her novel and interviews, Romare has shown a limited understanding of these mechanisms. Her subjective experience was that

serial dating is a form of self-harm. You are not rejected for something you say or think, but for how you are as a person. You show yourself

from your best side on a date—you are funny and social, have dressed up, and have sex. It is so incredibly intimate and vulnerable. I really gave it my all every time, and still no one wanted me.⁸⁶

Romare took notes during this period as a form of self-therapy. She turned these into an original, vulnerable, and courageously self-revealing novel that triggered a bidding war among Swedish publishers. *Half of Malmö* received mixed reviews for its literary qualities, praise for its themes, and inspired a debate that is ongoing.⁸⁷ The novel is being adapted into a Netflix series scheduled for 2025.⁸⁸

Half of Malmö begins by introducing readers to Amanda's group of female friends.⁸⁹ They all have the same experience of unlimited sexual access but mostly being involuntarily single. Her sister insists that Amanda "is a 10 and that 10s date in all leagues."⁹⁰ Amanda considers her mate value to be 7 on a 10-point scale and is cognizant of her sex partners having a higher value: "The guy in front of me with the flowing golden-brown hair and the big dark-green irises was definitely two or three leagues above mine" (6). At no point, however, does she consider that there can be a difference between someone's short- and long-term mate value. A man can be so sexy that women consider him exquisite for casual copulation, but if he is unemployed, emotionally unstable, cognitively weak,⁹¹ and dislikes children, his long-term value is far lower. Women, too, are evaluated differently for one-night stands and relationships. Amanda assigns value to herself and potential partners based mostly on how sexy they appear in the context of a first date. Given her stated goal of finding a long-term partner, she assesses value, selects men, and chooses dating strategies in a dysfunctional manner. She presents herself as sexually available since this elicits a more favorable response from the men whom she perceives to be the most attractive. Research supports that her strategy is effective for short-term mating but can work counter to her long-term ambitions.⁹²

Amanda's first sex partner in the novel is a management consultant. He is the best-looking man she has seen in a long time, a Jake Gyllenhaal-lookalike with a large, pleasure-inducing penis and a large, central apartment. Having exceptional looks and finances, he fulfills important female preferences for both short- and long-term mating. The consultant and his friend are by far the superior males in the bar. An hour after meeting them, Amanda and her friend are on their way to have sex. Neither of the women is later invited for a second date. This encounter speaks to how Amanda adapts to the preferences of short-term-oriented men to gain access to the men who arouse her the most. She does not have sufficient long-term mate value to be considered a potential girlfriend by long-term-oriented, high-value men. She also does not seek out the arenas that promote long-term-oriented

dating. Bars and Tinder give her immediate access to the most attractive men, as long as she makes herself sexually available from the onset.

Sexual conflict theory posits that a core conflict between the sexes is how much time should pass before the first intercourse.⁹³ Attractive men have more partners and wait less time.⁹⁴ By agreeing to have sex with the consultant after one hour, Amanda signals that she does not require a high investment.⁹⁵ Short-term-oriented men prefer such mates, making Amanda more than good enough for a one-night stand. Her maladaptive strategies are informed by how hominin females evolved highly selective preferences for short-term mating to ensure that in case of pregnancy, the offspring would at least have good genes.⁹⁶ Women's promiscuous attraction system is exceptionally discriminatory but can trigger as strong impulses as that of men. Bendixen et al. found that the very sexiest men arouse in women an equally strong sense of attraction as the sexiest women arouse in men.⁹⁷ In such instances—at least in gender-equal and sexually liberal Scandinavia—women signal their attraction even more strongly than what men do; when they finally encounter a man able to arouse them, they often seize the opportunity. However, when women encounter average men, they are less attracted than what men are to average women.

These mechanisms trigger emotions that motivate Amanda to adopt short-term strategies that go against her own pair-bonding ambitions. She has conflicting desires that the modern, Scandinavian environment makes more challenging to navigate. In these countries, dating typically involves early sex. To be motivated for copulation on the first date, Amanda feels that she has no choice but to pursue only the men who immediately trigger her lust. If she had considered more carefully which qualities would be more important to her in a long-term partner, she may have adjusted the value she assigns different traits, like Josefin had done in *Sigurd*. Amanda and her friends' choice of mating arenas, their signaling of short-term intentions, and selection of men with far superior short-term mate value all but ensure that copulation does not progress to pair-bonding. Studies show that men prefer similar-value and less sexually available women when seeking a long-term partner.⁹⁸

Amanda has sex on the first date to motivate men to meet her again so that, over time, they can realize her long-term value. With regard to the men she dates and in light of her goals, this *bait-and-switch strategy* is misguided. The *affective shift hypothesis* describes how promiscuously successful, short-term-oriented men tend to detach emotionally following first-time intercourse. While women often experience positive affect after sex, which is meant to facilitate a long-term relationship, men who have had many partners often find women less sexually and physically attractive after intercourse. This is generally not the case for men who have had few sex partners.⁹⁹ For Amanda, a more goal-aligned strategy would be to find men willing to spend precoital time with her. If such a candidate

and Amanda had sufficient time to see if their personalities matched, if they had shared interests, and matching intelligence and other traits, then pair-bonding would be a more likely outcome.

After suffering intense feelings of sexual regret, Amanda comes to suspect that early sex is not the best way to sell herself as a long-term partner. When she experiments with holding back sex, she finds that the most attractive men are less interested. She bemoans, “Do I have to agree to immediate sex to be allowed to have sex?!” (85). Again, her conflicting desires—for higher-value men and a relationship—lead to confusion, informed by her evolved psychology. Women’s short- and long-term mating criteria are relatively similar, so women often treat casual sex as a springboard for long-term relationships. The fact that modern mating arenas channel so much sexual opportunity to the most attractive men makes casual sex a less suited entry point for pair-bonding.

Kennair et al. found that people do not consider it a good dating strategy for women or men to have early sex if their ambitions are long-term.¹⁰⁰ People believe that it is more conducive to have fun together, engage in deep conversations, and spend significant amounts of time with each other. In spite of feeling increasingly painful regret, Amanda does not change her strategies, seek out more long-term-oriented mating markets, or pursue men more likely to have long-term intentions. She seems neither to understand the intricacies of her own mating psychology, nor be able to read the intentions of the men with whom she has sex. In line with the findings of Kennair et al.,¹⁰¹ Amanda’s feelings of intense regret trigger no adaptive shift in behavior, as pain does not always communicate effectively enough how we should change.

Too-Good-Looking, Crazy-Fit Players

Amanda continues to do what feels best in the moment. She approaches whom she finds to be the most attractive man in the bar or swipes right on the minuscule number of Tinder men who give the impression of fulfilling her mate preferences. She thinks about lowering her standards, but the affective rewards that the most compelling men offer when they charm her on first dates habituate Amanda to high-arousal encounters.¹⁰² A few of her sex partners agree to additional dates, but only after she has taken the initiative. Romare offers a convincing portrayal of how having unlimited access to sexy men shapes female expectations. One date was

too good looking . . . had a really big dick, and was crazy fit. So tight muscles that you almost could not feel anything soft when you touched your fingers against his skin. I have only met one such man before, whose skin felt like cement.

(48–9)

Before they have sex, Amanda cannot help but ask him if he is “a player,” similar to how Josefin asked Sigurd if he was “an asshole.” The date smoothly brushes aside her accusation. Amanda suspects what awaits postcoitus but gives in to desire. The experienced high-value man is able to provide her with gratifying sex but has no interest in spending the full night with her; he detaches emotionally. Amanda has grown accustomed to being sent home once the copulation is over. She reflects around how dysfunctional this is but lays the blame on men for being exploitative.

Amanda continues her search for a highly arousing boyfriend. On a date with a 6’3” professional dancer, she describes him as shockingly handsome, a god-like man with great hair, hands, and teeth. He has the social skills to give Amanda her best ever Tinder date. At times, her selection of men is done with a greater focus on traits that have long-term value, but since she has top-shelf access, she cannot bring herself to select less-compelling men. She dates professional athletes, celebrity musicians, medical doctors, and other high-status individuals. In an interview, Romare said that “after every time I was dumped, I lowered my demands more and more until there was nothing left.”¹⁰³ Based on how she describes her selection process and the characteristics of her dates later in the book, she may have lowered her standards some, but at least the fictional Amanda seems mostly to have continued dating higher-value men.

In terms of first dates, most of these men are superior choices. Having the talents that allow them to succeed with short-term mating, and the dating experience that comes with that, result in the top percentiles of men being able to cater to women’s short-term preferences in a manner that average men generally cannot. Theoretically, women could benefit from their sex’s short-term market power by sexually consuming the most attractive men for as long as they pleased, then change orientation and strategies to attract a similar-value partner with traits and attitudes more conducive to long-term mating. For some women, such a transition seems challenging. Having grown accustomed to short-term mating with attractive men can have adverse consequences for a woman’s ability to forge successful pair-bonds. If serially dating higher-value men leads women to overestimate their own mate value, they are likely to increase their mate standards across a variety of indicators, making it hard to find someone who is both compelling enough and willing to bond with them.¹⁰⁴ Amanda arrives at the realization that it is the modern dating format itself that has made her so discriminatory:

Is it so that when you feel that a date is too good to be true, it is actually too good to be true? That only *douches* can be so intimate and loving the first time you meet, and that it therefore never ends well?

(236)

By “douches,” she seems to refer to short-term-oriented, high-value men who are high in Dark Triad traits.¹⁰⁵ In Chapter 6, I investigated a more long-term-oriented version of such men, but that was a personality adapted to the nineteenth century. Unlike Rudolph Seiler, twenty-first-century Dark Triad men need not invest years in courtship. Men with these traits are often drawn to sexual conquering, capable of making a strong first impression, and able to get their way at the expense of others. Realizing that such men are the only ones able to elicit her arousal and infatuation—at least on first dates—Amanda feels like she wants to die.

This is an emotional low point of the book, the scene in which she understands that her own psychology is to blame—not primarily the men whom she has allowed to fulfill their own mate preferences. Her emotions—against which she feels powerless—draw her to men with whom exploitation is a likelier outcome than pair-bonding. More average men with a long-term orientation generally do not have those traits and skills that arouse in her an immediate desire to mate. In bars, they do not show up on her radar. On Tinder, she swipes them away. As David Buss writes, female choosiness seems to make most men “invisible as viable options in women’s mating minds.”¹⁰⁶ The majority of men simply do not exist when women consider their options. Tinder caters to this aspect of female psychology by making rejection a breeze—effortless swipes that erase 95% of men from the woman’s digital pool of potential mates.

Modern technology and dating norms are not optimized for pair-bonding. In the context of a first date out on town, it is hard for men with high long-term mate value to showcase qualities such as their partner and parenting skills, their willingness to commit and invest in the pair-bond, their strong social standing, and their ability to plan and provide. Although both sexes prefer a high level of agreeableness in long-term partners, Dark Triad traits seem more effective for making a strong enough first impression. If Amanda had prioritized spending time with similar-value men, she may—instead of depending on her *promiscuous attraction system*—have experienced emerging feelings of love, a pair-bonding emotion that motivates women to have sex also with lower-value men.¹⁰⁷ This *pair-bonding attraction system* was catered to by older forms of courtship, like those under the courtly, companionate, and romantic regimes.

In the premodern era, Amanda would have had access to a much smaller number of potential mates. The courtship likely would have lasted months or years. She would have gotten to know her courter more deeply, and he her. Tinder encourages her to evaluate a never-ending line of men, using seconds or minutes on each. Research shows that when women have many choices, they tend to eliminate candidates by a single attribute at a time. Visual cues become more important. For Amanda, her selecting attribute is mostly hotness, which is central when your dating strategy includes sex

on the first meeting. When women have fewer options, they focus less on visual aspects and evaluate potential partners more holistically. Having faced a smaller pool of candidates also leaves people more satisfied with their decision.¹⁰⁸

Amanda feels debilitated by choice. Romare portrays that she falls prey to her own evolved mate preferences, but as a consequence of the twenty-first-century environment. In interviews, Romare has suggested that one solution could be to return to twentieth-century mating practices.¹⁰⁹ Such nostalgia is unlikely to generate productive solutions, as Western mating seems to evolve in one direction only—forward, toward novelty. Romare states that today's technologies and mating morality make it too hard for women to fulfill their desire for a relationship. Many of the surveys cited in this book support her position. One factor is how there is nearly no cultural pressure on Amanda that encourages her to change her strategies. Her promiscuity is not discouraged through shaming, a practice that is relatively rare in today's gender-equal Scandinavia.¹¹⁰ Instead, she had felt ashamed prior to beginning her serial dating for having had only seven sex partners. Wanting to increase her number of lifetime partners at the same as she seeks a boyfriend appears to be the main misstep that generates the habits that Amanda later struggles to move past.

Half of Malmö places the blame on present-day culture, not female agency. This thematic argument evokes that of Louise Perry in *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*.¹¹¹ Women were promised emancipation through sexual liberation, but confluent love has primarily benefited the small number of men with high short-term mate value. Eva Illouz makes a similar case in *The End of Love: A Sociology of Negative Relations*.¹¹² Modern mating reduces people to consumer goods, she posits, transforming sex into an economic unit to be distributed on markets.¹¹³ These iniquitous mating markets seem increasingly to move underground. Premodern mating efforts tended to occur in communal arenas. In *The New Laws of Love: Online Dating and the Privatization of Intimacy*, sociologist Marie Bergström writes that many women have begun to hide their mating, even from friends.¹¹⁴ Her interviewees would often not date men from their own social circle or introduce dates to friends. Apps make it easier for women to have casual sex without being judged, as by keeping sex partners secret, they avoid expectations of chastity. The narrative in *Half of Malmö* suggests that women could also be motivated to hide dates so that their social group remains unaware of postcoital rejections, which could be used to ascribe lower mate value to the rejected woman.

Bergström, Illouz, and Perry conclude that today's mating regime is unhealthy. Contemporary sex norms align poorly with female psychology and societal demands. Earlier moralities channeled sexual lust into social

behaviors that mostly ended in marriage and reproduction. Today's hedonism encourages people to do what feels best in the moment. In the latter half of *Half of Malmö*, Amanda's challenge is to master how not to do what provides her the greatest short-term affective rewards, but what can get her pair-bonded. Her turning point comes after she, for the first time, is able to sympathize with incels.

A Dating Junkie in Love's Shit Barrel

Tinder is Amanda's symbolic antagonist. She had tried the app two years prior to her serial dating project but deleted it after having had disappointing sex on her first date—a not uncommon experience for women.¹¹⁵ When she again downloads it, she refers to Tinder as “love's shit barrel” (87). She feels that she has no choice if she is to find a mate. For someone seeking long-term commitment, this more short-term-oriented app is not a great choice, but its cultural position and addiction-inducing algorithms have made it the world's premier dating app. Its economics incentivize the app's owners to keep users single and paying high monthly fees, the highest of which—as mentioned in the previous chapter—is \$500.¹¹⁶

Amanda gets dopamine rushes from swiping and matching that keep her going. Facing nothing but postcoital rejection exhausts her, but she feels unable to change her attitude and strategies. “I have become addicted to this dating,” she admits, “Do you know how condescending I was toward others who were like me just ten months ago?” (222). Midway through the novel, she decides to delete Tinder and stop dating. She has no alternative strategy but wants the pain to stop—she just has one more man to meet, and after him, another, and so forth. She feels that her serial dating has changed her psychological makeup. Two weeks before her decision to quit, Amanda was surprised to feel similar to involuntarily celibate men:

I have never understood the incel movement. Seriously, they are so fucked up in the head. Today, though, I got this thought when a few cuties passed me in the city. Crap. Why isn't anyone fucking me? I'm walking here in the city, with a fully loaded vagina, and no one takes the chance. That's not fair. It's your fucking duty to satisfy me. Somewhere around there I understood the similarity.

(145–6)

Dead tired of her Groundhog Day of first dates, she wants to tell men on Tinder, “Ok, just come here and we'll be in love, ok?” (214). Sexual conflict theory suggests that she has been too cooperative with her dates, not sufficiently viewing first encounters as an arena for intersexual

competition. Amanda feels that she cannot handle any more plans that never come to fruition. Before sex, her dates talk about what they will do together, their mom whom Amanda soon will meet, and the adventures they will embark on. When men talk about integrating a date into their social circle, this can be an effective strategy for conveying long-term intentions, but short-term-oriented men typically avoid delivering on such promises.¹¹⁷ Women having evolved to be the sexual selectors incentivizes such men to be deceptive; 71% of men admit to having exaggerated how they feel in order to get laid.¹¹⁸ A ruthless example is how Amanda's friend was told by her date that he "had never meet anyone as wonderful as you" (121). After sex, he gave her half an hour to leave and never replied to her texts. Amanda repeatedly suffers similar postcoital behaviors but never understands or adapts to the short-term strategies of the highly experienced men she dates.

Feeling trapped in this self-constructed loop of exploitation and addiction, Amanda sees no solutions. She believes Tinder is ruining her life, but the app is also her most cherished comfort, although one that seems no more concerned with her well-being than what the men she dates are. Tinder sends her *peak alerts*, informing her that she can get ten times as many exposures to potential mates—if she logs in *now*. She gives in:

When I returned to the app—*fucking hell how wonderful*. It was an incredible feeling to be welcomed back into the comfortable environment and swipe from guy to guy . . . Never has an app made such a nice feeling flow through me.

(238)

Her addiction is so strong that

if I am to be honest, I check the app about once a minute. Every time I put down the mobile, I pick it up again. I swiped through all of Malmö that night, and I am now going through guys in Copenhagen (in spite of me not liking Danes!).

(239)

The expression "all of Malmö" reveals the limitation of her outlook. The large number of Malmö men who could be willing to pair-bond with her are less likely to operate on Tinder, an app that primarily distributes casual sex to men with the highest short-term value. The type of men who used to succeed with attracting women in bars—and who still do—seem to be the same men who flourish on apps.¹¹⁹ This pattern is ancient; as I covered in the Introduction chapter, *Homo*

communities seem always to have had a small proportion of promiscuous maters.¹²⁰

Goetz et al. believe that this proportion is increasing as a consequence of large urban markets, social anonymity, and a culture of sexual openness.¹²¹ The modern environment seems to trigger short-term ambitions even in lower-value men—as they witness the mating success of the most attractive men—which was the case with Sigurd. Yong et al. found that not only female insings but low-value men are adopting unrealistic standards that prevent pair-bonding.¹²² Mating opportunities may be increasingly channeled to the most attractive men, but also other men respond to our present era's promiscuity with a choosiness that makes it even harder for them to find a partner. Women may never have had greater access to short-term mating, but such practices bring fewer advantages than it did in our ancestral environment, when women to a greater extent could depend on short-term mates to offer gifts as a show of appreciation.¹²³ The result of these developments is lose-lose dynamics for large groups of both men and women.

Seeing Regular Men as Anomalies

Amanda's possible salvation comes in the form of Emil, a man whose good looks make him appear to be a player but whose insecurities have contributed to him adopting a long-term orientation. Confident men can also be long-term-oriented, but Romare's portrayal of Emil suggests that his shy nervousness has hindered him from engaging in the mating behaviors to which most characters in her book seem drawn. He badly wants to pair-bond with Amanda, but she is not sure whether she is capable of settling for someone who only has the exterior to which she has grown accustomed but not the confident personality.

Their courtship illustrates the struggles insings can experience when transitioning away from serial dating the most attractive men. Wary of falling prey to more short-term deception, Amanda demands to know when Emil last had sex, which was three years ago with his ex. He is a nerdy gamer who immediately falls in love and swears to pair-bond for as long as she will let him. The morning after their first copulation, he whispers, "I can't believe that it is possible to be this close to another person" (271). He is precisely what Amanda has told herself that she wants:

Amanda, I said quietly to myself, all you've whined about all year is that you haven't found a kind and nice and good guy, who likes you, and now there's one in the bed, take the chance! Never mind his weird comments, you know that he says those things because he is insecure.

(290)

It is unclear whether Emil is debilitatingly insecure or just lacks the social bravado that characterizes many promiscuous men. Amanda and her friends are so accustomed to the winners on short-term markets that they interpret other men to be anomalies. As Amanda tries to get used to Emil's low-key personality, her friend suffers a date with someone in "the worst Tinder category" (272), meaning that he is shy and quiet. Incapable of giving a sexy impression from the onset, such men rarely get to display potential long-term qualities. Romare elaborates on how the demands of modern dating incentivize women to disregard men who are unable to trigger immediate arousal. Amanda has second thoughts about their future together after Emil declines her offer of having sex in a public park. In bed, when he awkwardly tries to shoot his sperm in her face, she concludes that he commits "the gravest 'cum-in-face' fail ever" (296). He cannot give her the sexual and social peak experiences that promiscuously successful men typically could already on the first date. Instead, he offers postcoital cuddling, long-term commitment, and monogamy.

Amanda fears that she has grown addicted to "bad-boy energy," that she is "incapable of taking care of love once she has found it," or that she and Emil are only together "because no one else wants them" (293). She decides to take the leap, symbolically by deleting Tinder. She refers to this as "going sober." She does not delete the account "in case I will want to download it again. I am not that confident that this will turn out well" (287). Although Amanda has spoken and narrated as if she has been exclusively long-term-oriented, she clearly has also been driven by short-term preferences. In order to overcome her conflicting desires, that is, to truly commit to a long-term orientation, she must overcome two final challenges. After more than a decade of being single, her identity and loyalties are tied to this group. She feels envious of two young women who talk about the men with whom they are about to have sex. Amanda bemoans, "That is a joy you only get from being single," (309) but reminds herself of the happiness you only get from being in love.

We could view this as a shift in attitude also motivated by her entering into a new life phase. Especially among people in their early 20s, a short-term orientation is common. Amanda had partied little and rarely had sex in her 20s. She presents her dating project as a search for a boyfriend but also seems driven to catch up with the short-term mating she had missed out on. Another motivating factor could be *reproductive expediting*, an increasing willingness to engage in sexual intercourse due to declining fertility.¹²⁴ Whichever her motivations are, the trauma Amanda suffers primarily stems from her not understanding the difference between male and female mate preferences and the power differentials on short-versus long-term markets. With so many dynamics of our era's mating regime being new, there exist few cultural scripts that convey to people

how to best strategize their mating efforts. Amanda's struggles are typical of how many women are left feeling vulnerable and confused.¹²⁵ By the time she meets Emil, she is more than ready to move on, although she struggles to let go of her new habits.

The second challenge comes in the form of a text from the consultant she had sex with at the beginning of the year. Finally, the Jake Gyllenhaal-lookalike invites her to a follow-up date. The novel ends as Amanda ponders,

a rich management consultant with a large apartment centrally in Malmö, or a poor student living in a student apartment in Kristianstad? No, cried a voice in my head. I am in love god dammit, cried the heart. I know, I answered back. What is wrong with me? Have I sunk so low during this year of dating that I cannot do without it. No, no, no. It can't be like that. Let this turn out well.

(310)

The Fallacy of Men vs. Women

Both Amanda and Sigurd end up pair-bonded, but in terms of agency and negotiating position, insings seem better positioned than incels. Gaining a better understanding of the power dynamics of modern mating would only be a small step forward for a man who has spent his life excluded from sex and relationships. Being at the bottom is a tough starting point. *Sigurd* attests to the challenging work that lies ahead for an incel who wants to succeed with mating. Insings are not necessarily at the bottom, as women of all mate values can miscalibrate their strategies in a manner that complicates pair-bonding. For these women, gaining a better understanding of mating markets could have a more immediate effect. *Half of Malmö* gives the impression that Amanda could have reduced her suffering and more quickly reached her mating goal if she only had understood why she had such easy access to sex while having difficult access to a relationship.

Not everyone accepts that women have high sexual access, or they reject that this is an appropriate topic for a discussion on gender differences. Sparks et al. write, "The notion that women are supposedly dictating the course of the so-called 'sexual marketplace' is highly problematic."¹²⁶ Such notions mostly result from people trying to understand mating from a perspective of women versus men. A weak point of much thinking on gender and sexuality has been to presuppose that the primary line of conflict must be between the sexes. Pitting women against men was an effective political strategy when fighting for equality, but such an approach generates blind spots. To understand mating, we must distinguish between men with low and high mate-values.

When mating becomes marked more by promiscuity and *de facto* polygyny—such as today—a relevant conflict line has women and high-value men on one side, and low-value men on the other. In today’s West, women do have the upper hand on short-term markets; they have plentiful access to new sex partners, while many men have little to none. Because a large majority of women direct their attention to a small minority of men, mostly the highest-value men benefit from women’s short-term market advantage. If causal sex had had greater value to more women, having practically unlimited access to copulation with higher-value mates could have been an astounding advantage; we can hardly imagine how men would respond if afforded the same privilege. The fact that many women use their market power to pursue the most immediately attractive men ends up preventing many of these women from fulfilling what is most people’s ultimate mating goal: to become pair-bonded.¹²⁷

I propose that one contributor to women’s maladaptive pursuit of higher-value men could be a preconscious belief in a tenet of romantic love. Confluent love has become hegemonic, but remnants of older mating moralities remain part of our culture. In Chapter 6, I elaborated on how romantic love conveyed the impression that even average women might be able to attract the highest-value men, as love was a function of having matching souls—not similar mate value. When Amanda admitted to her romantic target being “definitely two or three leagues above mine” (6), yet still thought that pair-bonding was a plausible outcome, her cognition and behavior were guided by 200-year-old ideology. Flygare-Carlén’s advice to women, of letting their romantic pursuits be steered somewhat more by reason, still rings relevant.

In addition to culture, biology may play in. Apostolou’s perspective on mismatch illuminates women’s maladaptive behavior.¹²⁸ When parents selected spouses, our female ancestors faced weak pressures in terms of being able to attract a long-term mate. Many women likely have traits that would not have affected their mating prospects in the past, but which in the modern environment contribute to singledom. Since parents more strictly control their daughters’ mate choice, women are likely to suffer a greater mismatch. Moreover, parents had a long time to assess courtiers and a community to help them do so. The modern dating format grants women often no more than an inebriated evening.

Our era’s economic prosperity empowers women to place an even greater emphasis on good genes. Our most reproductively successful ancestors were probably not the prettiest men. When parental choice governed mating, males who worked hard, built networks and alliances, and could lead a family were preferred for reproduction. Short-term-oriented Adonises ran a high risk of being killed by the kin of their latest illicit affair. Our female ancestors, too, were likely much more aroused by sexy men,

but the demands of a more impoverished environment required submission to companionate ideals. Being choosier is a modern luxury, one that increases the time it takes to find a mate, and the risk of failing to attract a mate, thus reducing women's reproductive period.¹²⁹ Scandinavian welfare societies seem to amplify choosiness. Generous public support is meant to contribute to higher fertility but can also have the opposite effect through raising women's standards for a long-term mate. The twenty-first-century environment seems to have made biparental care so optional that many women, like Amanda, are driven to place even greater maladaptive emphasis on good genetic quality.¹³⁰

Considering the stakes of our present era's mating dysfunction, it has become imperative to develop a better understanding of how mismatch motivates behaviors that run counter to our own interests.¹³¹ Men and women are at an alarming rate opting out of mating.¹³² Of Americans under age 30, 47% are single. Only 50% of single men express an interest in short- or long-term mating, down from 61% in 2019. Single women are even more demotivated: only 35% are looking to mate.¹³³ Over the past two decades, past-year sexual inactivity among young men rose from 19 to 31%.¹³⁴ Another survey indicates that from 2008 to 2018, virginity among men under age 30 rose from around 8 to 27%.¹³⁵ After dating apps were introduced, low-value men suffered increasing discrimination, but women kept having sex at previous levels.¹³⁶ This seems now to have become unsatisfying. A recent survey found that among American women, past-year sexual inactivity has risen to 32%.¹³⁷

These and other statistics attest to deep dysfunction. The increasing competition, exploitation, and hopelessness that mark twenty-first-century mating motivate, among a growing number of men and women, an aversion against participating. The British author, podcaster, and rapper Zubey believes that older people do not realize how drastically things have changed:

I think it's fair to say that most people who have been out of the dating market for 10+ years . . . MASSIVELY underestimate the amount of nonsense that young men and women are now dealing with. If it's 15+ years, no chance. It's a crapshow. If you have a good man or a good woman who loves you, hold on to them for dear life. You don't want to be out in these streets. It's a mess.¹³⁸

Sigurd and *Half of Malmö* offer insights into the individual and social mechanisms that drive this frustration. A better understanding of sex differences and mating markets could help people adjust their expectations and strategies in a productive manner. Such insights may also help the sexes sympathize more with each other's respective plights. At the beginning of

this chapter, when Axfors and Barr insisted that “men” have the power on mating markets, they disregarded the lived experience of more than 80% of men.¹³⁹ Axfors’s reframing of men’s low expectations as a privilege that provides more choices and “relational power” is similar to presenting poverty as liberating. When Romare interpreted “guys” to be less interested in second dates,¹⁴⁰ she did not sufficiently consider the filtration to which she had subjected the male dating pool before she sat across from attractive, short-term-oriented men.¹⁴¹

The way in which Nossen and Rustad rejected the title *Sigurd Can’t Get Laid* exemplifies a common blindness to how women’s increasing discrimination of the lowest-value men has detrimental effects on many men’s quality of life.¹⁴² A survey found that 82% of incels have considered suicide.¹⁴³ From an evolutionary perspective, happiness is a reward we experience for solving adaptively relevant problems.¹⁴⁴ Nothing is more central to adaptivity than reproduction.¹⁴⁵ When men are excluded from short- and long-term mating, their well-being system is meant to go into high alert to signal that they are failing at the core task of all life: to replicate DNA. Sensations of ill-being and depression are your organism telling your conscious self that your strategies are failing—that you should pursue new ones. Rustad is therefore misguided when she insists that a lack of intimacy is ill-suited for explaining Sigurd’s depression. She is right, however, in fearing that the connection between incelhood and male ill-being can contribute to what she calls “toxic masculinity.”¹⁴⁶ Grunau et al. found that unwanted celibacy predicts male misogyny.¹⁴⁷ Brooks et al. found an increase in incel-related tweets from areas with a deficit of women, where men struggle even more to find a partner.¹⁴⁸

There is a connection between being excluded from mating and misogynistic behavior, but—importantly—only a small minority of incels resort to such antisociality. Mostly, they just feel bad. The combination of increased stratification and confluent ideals results in a growing number of men feeling worse about missing out. In Finland, men want more sex now than before.¹⁴⁹ This is unfortunate, as from 1992 to 2015, the number of men who struggled to find a partner doubled. Concurrently, the number of male virgins increased.¹⁵⁰ The incel movement tries to bring attention to how this social evolution contributes to male suffering. Their agenda is “to claim rational status . . . and reframe their situation of involuntary celibacy as a legitimate life circumstance.”¹⁵¹ Western cultures continuing to conceptualize incels as angry, irrational men against whom society must protect itself, is unlikely to make things better.¹⁵²

Beyond Ridicule and Belittlement

The question is not whether being deprived of mating makes incels feel bad—because it does, similarly to how being deprived of pair-bonding

can make insings feel bad.¹⁵³ A more challenging question is why this increasing male marginalization has not become a greater problem for society at large. William Costello and David Buss propose the *Male Sedation Hypothesis* to explain why Western incels have not become even more destructive.¹⁵⁴ Terrorist attacks that have cost dozens of lives naturally are gruesome for those affected but pale against historical experience. As I covered in Chapter 1, societies with high incel rates traditionally have suffered an increase in social instability, crime, violence against women, and aggressive and risk-taking behaviors—a phenomenon known as the *young male syndrome*.¹⁵⁵ The Male Sedation Hypothesis engages why our era's high rate of sexual inactivity has not burdened the West with groups similar to the Vikings, Boko Haram, and other antisocial movements that throughout history have attracted young men with poor mating prospects. Costello and Buss hypothesize that online worlds, such as porn and gaming, provide a counterfeit sense of sexual and status fulfillment.¹⁵⁶ Instead of joining wars, colonial conquest, or the overthrow of governments, today's incels mostly masturbate and pretend to be soldiers in front of screens.¹⁵⁷ For greater society, such behavior is preferable, but this reality should, ideally, motivate more sympathy than derision.¹⁵⁸

Similarly, we should sympathize with the struggles of insings. Men should not evaluate the experiences of women from a perspective of male mate preferences. Understandably, average men could find it hard to sympathize when Romare accounts for the distress her mother suffered after joining Facebook Dating.¹⁵⁹ In a few hours, the 58-year-old received requests from 400 to 500 men. Every minute, a new man expressed interest. For men who mostly face rejection and silence, such attention could appear utopian, but women experience these dynamics differently. They are to no greater extent able to free themselves from their evolved mate preferences than what men are; human agency is not as powerful as portrayed by modern, liberal ideology.¹⁶⁰ The fact that Romare was unable to stop dating attractive men who only wanted sex, without her understanding why, could be made fun of, which some have done. But ridiculing each other's mating challenges does not promote better communication between the sexes.

Romare's confusion is far from unique. A Norwegian influencer expresses similar views with regard to the men she finds most compelling on Tinder: "Those I find interesting are not interested in anything serious or want 'something simple' that does not challenge them in any way."¹⁶¹ She is not the only disgruntled dater who complains publicly about today's "men," as a consequence of her own inability to distinguish between "men" and "short-term-oriented, high-value men." Linn Leigland deleted Tinder after having had to "kiss many frogs disguised as princes," by which she means men who have sex with more than one woman. These experiences made

her “a worse, sadder, and more cynical person.”¹⁶² Hilde Nordlund rages against “fuckboys in their forties.”¹⁶³ Johanne Bille concludes, after years of postcoital rejections, that men lack depth.¹⁶⁴

Incels and insings are easy to ridicule and belittle. As marginalized groups, they are so new to the modern Western attention that we are yet to develop the cultural scripts that grant them the sympathy they deserve. This chapter’s fictional case studies offer insights into how painful their experiences can be and how large of a shadow erotic and romantic failures can cast on individual lives. Villainizing men who suffer involuntary celibacy is not a constructive way forward, and neither is diminishing the pain felt by women who remain single because they are unable to resist the temptation of serially dating higher-value men. Both incels and insings fall victim to our evolved mate preferences.

Communities that gain a deeper understanding of what these preferences are could experience better intersexual communication, which might aid men and women in finding more functional ways to mate—in the short run. In the long run, mating seems about to be transformed beyond recognition. A better understanding of how we arrived at the beliefs and practices that mark today’s mating, could be of help also when we must adapt to the technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Android spouses, AI-driven partner matches, and genetically modified babies grown in artificial wombs are among the innovations expected to transform human lives and living in the generations ahead. The Fourth Sexual Revolution could make the three previous mating transitions pale in comparison.

Notes

- 1 Larsen, “Historicist Cosmopolitanism”; Larsen, *Master-Narrative Transitions*.
- 2 Fukuyama, *The End of History*.
- 3 Nate Schenkkan and Sarah Repucci, “The Freedom House Survey for 2018: Democracy in Retreat,” *Journal of Democracy* 30.2 (2019): 100–14.
- 4 Gelles-Watnick, “For Valentine’s Day.”
- 5 Bergløff, “Det nye singelnorge”; Fry and Parker, “Rising Share.”
- 6 Vollset et al., “Fertility.”
- 7 “Incel” is one of those terms that in the contemporary discourse is given two distinct meanings, but mostly used as if one of the definitions is the obvious one. The more neutral meaning is that an incel is a man who is involuntary celibate. The more derogatory meaning refers to misogynist men who threaten violence on incel forums. Men who self-identify—or are referred to—as incels therefore risk being grouped in with people who are feared, hated, and attacked. I use the neutral definition of the term. On incel forums, the incel definition often relates to how long it has been since a man has had sex. Requirements seem to range from six months to five years of sexual inactivity, not counting prostitution. Others take a more holistic view of a man’s life, meaning that you cannot identify as an incel later in life if you previously had access to copulation and pair-bonding; Eirik Sande, “Verdiløse menn: En

- kvalitativ studie av kjønn, erotisk kapital og fellesskap blant incels på internett,” thesis, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, 2021, 37–8.
- 8 Depending on the environment, incels in the West comprise perhaps 10–35% of male populations; Ingraham, “Young Male Virginity on the Rise”; Ueda et al., “Trends in Frequency”; Lena Lindgren, “Hva er det som egentlig feiler incels,” *Morgenbladet*, September 30, 2022.
 - 9 William Costello and David M. Buss, “Why Isn’t There More Incel Violence?” *Adaptive Human Behavior and Physiology* 9 (2023): 252–9.
 - 10 William Costello et al., “The Mating Psychology of Incels (Involuntary Celibates): Misfortunes, Misperceptions, and Misrepresentations,” 2023 preprint.
 - 11 Sande, “Verdiløse menn.”
 - 12 Joonä Räsänen, “Sexual Loneliness: A Neglected Public Health Problem?” *Bioethics* (2023).
 - 13 Baumeister, *Is There Anything Good about Men?* A common estimate is that of all women who reached adulthood, 80% reproduced. For men, the assumed proportion is 40%.
 - 14 Coontz, *Marriage, a History*.
 - 15 Brooks et al., “Effects of Gender Inequality.”
 - 16 Rob Brooks, *Artificial Intimacy: Virtual Friends, Digital Lovers, and Algorithmic Matchmakers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).
 - 17 Argyle, “Causes and Correlates of Happiness”; Diener et al., “Similarity of the Relations”; Grover and Helliwell, “How’s Life at Home?”; Costello et al., “Levels of Well-Being Among Men Who Are Incel”; Bjørn Grinde, “The Contribution of Sex to Quality of Life in Modern Societies,” *Applied Research in Quality of Life* (2021).
 - 18 Bainbridge, “Demographic Collapse”; Eberstadt, “Can America Cope with Demographic Decline?”; Peter Zeihan, *The End of the World is Just the Beginning* (New York: HarperCollins, 2022).
 - 19 Apostolou, *Sexual Selection in Homo sapiens*.
 - 20 Goetz et al., “Evolutionary Mismatch in Mating”; Kennair and Biegler, “Conflicting Tastes”; Biegler and Kennair, “Sisterly Love.”
 - 21 Buss, *The Evolution of Desire*. Since men often place great value on partner variety, a small proportion of men can cater to a large proportion of women on the short-term market. Attesting to men’s higher sociosexuality is how gay and bisexual men have 6–8 times more sex partners than heterosexual men; Catherine H. Mercer et al., “The Health and Well-Being of Men who Have Sex with Men (MSM) in Britain: Evidence from the Third National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles (Natsal-3),” *BMC Public Health* 16 (2016): 525.
 - 22 Buss and Schmitt, “Sexual Strategies Theory.”
 - 23 Argyle, “Causes and Correlates of Happiness”; Diener et al., “Similarity of the Relations”; Grover and Helliwell, “How’s Life at Home?”; Menelaos et al., “What are Romantic Relationships Good for?”; <https://ifstudies.org/blog/married-people-are-living-their-best-lives>.
 - 24 Campbell, “The Morning after the Night Before”; Fernandes et al., “Are Negative Postcoital Emotions a Product of Evolutionary Adaptation?; Leif E. O. Kennair et al., “Sexual Regret: Tests of Competing Explanations of Sex Differences,” *Evolutionary Psychology* 14.4 (2016): 1–9; Leif E. O. Kennair et al., “Sexual Regret,” in Todd K. Shackelford & Viviana A. Weekes-Shackelford, eds., *Encyclopedia of Evolutionary Psychological Science* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 1–5; Leif E. O. Kennair et al., “Why do

- Women Regret Casual Sex More than Men Do?” *Personality and Individual Differences* 127 (2018): 61–7.
- 25 Brooke A. Scelza, “Choosy but not Chaste: Multiple Mating in Human Females,” *Evolutionary Anthropology* 22.5 (2013): 259–69.
 - 26 Maryanne L. Fisher et al., eds., *Evolution’s Empress: Darwinian Perspectives on the Nature of Women* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Maryanne L. Fisher and Catherine Bourgeois, Special Issue: Beyond the Ingénue: Current Evolutionary Perspectives of Women, *Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences* 14.1 (2020): 1–5.
 - 27 Jaimie Arona Krems et al., “Lay Beliefs about Gender and Sexual Behavior: First Evidence for a Pervasive, Robust (but Seemingly Unfounded) Stereotype,” *Psychological Science* 32.6 (2021): 871–89.
 - 28 Buss and Schmitt, “Evolutionary Psychology and Feminism.”
 - 29 For instance, Kathryn A. Baselice, “Analyzing Incels through the Lens of Evolutionary Psychology,” *Culture and Evolution* (2022); Blake and Brooks, “Societies Should not Ignore their Incel Problem”; Costello et al., “Levels of Well-Being Among Men Who Are Incel”; Bruce Hoffman et al., “Assessing the Threat of Incel Violence,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 43 (2020): 565–87; Brandon Sparks et al., “Involuntary Celibacy: A Review of Incel Ideology and Experiences with Dating, Rejection, and Associated Mental Health and Emotional Sequelae,” *Current Psychiatry Reports* 24 (2022): 731–40; Brandon Sparks et al., “One is the Loneliest Number: Involuntary Celibacy (Incel), Mental Health, and Loneliness,” *Current Psychology* (2023); Ruth Rebecca Tietjen and Sanna K. Tirkkonen, “The Rage of Lonely Men: Loneliness and Misogyny in the Online Movement of ‘Involuntary Celibates’ (Incels),” *Topoi* (2023).
 - 30 For instance, Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*; Illouz, *The End of Love*; Harrington, *Feminism Against Progress*.
 - 31 Anna Axfors, “Horace verkar ha rätt— dejting är som et krig,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, February 12, 2022, 38–9.
 - 32 Regine Stokstad, “Dumpet av halve Malmö,” *Dagens Näringsliv*, December 22, 2021, <https://www.dn.no/d2/bok/amanda-romare/dating/bok/dumpet-av-halve-malmo/2-1-1113780>. Tinder users swipe right on the profiles of people whom they would like to get to know. If both parties swipe right, a chat window opens that allows them to communicate.
 - 33 Linus Kuhlén, “Amanda Romare ger röst åt inceltjeerna,” *Varbergsposten*, November 27, 2021, 45.
 - 34 Björn Barr, “Hemsk insikt—men de har rätt om männen,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, July 17, 2022, 20–1.
 - 35 Aurora K. Nossen, “Kjære Dplay, når jeg ser tittelen ‘Sigurd fække pult,’ knytter det seg i meg,” *Aftenposten*, March 16, 2020, <https://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/debatt/i/opGz5a/kjaere-dplay-naar-jeg-ser-tittelen-sigurd-faakke-pult-knytter-det-seg-i-meg-aurora-k-nossen>.
 - 36 Gry C. Rustad, “Trist sex-serie,” *Dagbladet*, March 13, 2020, 26.
 - 37 Similar to how the Nordic countries often took a lead in the move toward female equality, they have begun to take men’s struggles more seriously. The Norwegian government has researched the dynamics of male marginalization three times in the twenty-first century, but without engendering significant insights; St.meld. 8, “Om menn, mansroller og likestilling,” 2008, <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/stmeld-nr-8-2008-2009/id539104/>; NOU 3, “Nye sjanser—bedre læring: Kjønnforskjeller i skoleprestasjoner og utdanningsløp,” Norges offentlige utredninger, 2019, <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/nou-2019-3/id2627718/>; NOU 8, “Likestillingsens neste

- steg — Mannsutvalgets rapport,” Norges offentlige utredninger, 2024, <https://www.regjeringen.no/no/dokumenter/nou-2024-8/id3035815/>. The 2022–2024 “Men’s Committee” was initiated by the feminist faction of the Labor Party. Its mandate for investigating male marginalization did not include dating or sex. The Minister in charge encouraged that the committee conclude that “men and women should be feminists together”; Kirsten Karlsen, “Nå er det kvinners tur: Skal dundre på for likestilling,” *Dagbladet*, November 21, 2021, <https://www.dagbladet.no/nyheter/skal-dundre-pa-for-likestilling/74629436>.
- 38 Danel Hammer, “Sigurd får ikke pult – og det bør oppta oss!” *Aftenposten*, March 18, 2020, <https://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/debatt/i/mR40a4/sigurd-faakke-pult-og-det-boer-oppta-oss-danel-hammer>.
- 39 Maha Kamran, “Det er ingen menneskerett å få pult, men det er faktisk et primærbehov,” *Subjekt*, March 19, 2020, <https://subjekt.no/2020/03/19/det-er-ingen-menneskerett-a-fa-pult-men-det-er-faktisk-et-primarbehov/>.
- 40 Aurora H. Krogh and Danby Choi, “Sigurd ‘får ikke pult,’ og det må være greit å snakke om,” *Subjekt*, March 13, 2020, <https://subjekt.no/2020/03/17/sigurd-fakke-pult-og-det-ma-vaere-helt-greit-a-snakke-om/>.
- 41 Oliver Stavik, “Sigurd får ikke pult. Sigurds problem skal tas på alvor, Nossen!” *Nettavisen*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.nettavisen.no/livsstil/sigurd-fakke-pult-sigurds-problem-skal-tas-pa-alvor-nossen/s/12-95-3423942811>.
- 42 My gratitude to Leif Kennair with whom I wrote an article on the material presented in this chapter. His insights were invaluable in developing the following analysis; Mads Larsen and Leif E. O. Kennair, “Enough with the Incels! A Literary Cry for Help from Female Insings (Involuntary Single),” *Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences*: Online First (2024).
- 43 Cecilia Køljing, “Var finns kvinnliga incels?” *Borås Tidning*, August 28, 2022, 5; Amanda Romare, “År jag Sveriges enda incelkvinna?” *Svenska Dagbladet*, July 24, 2022, 20–1; Kuhlín, “Amanda Romare ger röst åt inceltjejerna.”
- 44 Stokstad, “Dumpet av halve Malmö.”
- 45 Sigurd Vik, “Sigurd får ikke pult S02,” *NRK*, February 17, 2021, <https://p3.no/filmpolitiet/2021/02/sigurd-fakke-pult-s02/>.
- 46 Reidar Spigseth, “Anmeldelse av ‘Sigurd får ikke pult’: Sårt og komisk om en ung manns bestrebelser,” *Dagsavisen*, March 9, 2020, <https://www.dagsavisen.no/nyheter/2020/03/09/anmeldelse-av-sigurd-fakke-pult-sart-og-komisk-om-en-ung-manns-bestrebelser/>.
- 47 Anon. “‘Sigurd får ikke pult’ er Årets Beste TV, og skaperne er drittlei sex,” *Natt&Dag*, 2021, <https://nattogdag.no/2021/02/sigurd-osloprisen/>.
- 48 Apostolou, *Sexual Selection in Homo sapiens*.
- 49 Mons Bendixen et al., “Adjusting Signals of Sexual Interest in the Most Recent Naturally Occurring Opposite-Sex Encounter in Two Different Contexts,” *Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences* (2019).
- 50 Season 1, episode 1, minute 6; hereafter in the format “s1e1m6.” Translations are mine.
- 51 How far we should go to help women avoid unwanted attention has become a hot topic that intersects with our era’s culture wars. News media reported that a nightclub in Sydney prohibited men from staring at women without first having secured verbal consent; Brooke Steinberg, “Nightclub Bans ‘Staring’ without ‘Verbal Consent’ in New ‘Woke’ Policy,” *New York Post*, August 25, 2022, <https://nypost.com/2022/08/25/nightclub-bans-staring-without-verbal-consent-in-new-woke-policy/>.
- 52 Sparks et al., “One is the Loneliest Number.”
- 53 Incels are criticized for their use of findings from evolutionary psychology to substantiate that they are being discriminated against. Laura Bates refers to

their use of the “80:20 theory” as a “bastardization of the Pareto principle”; Laura Bates, *Men Who Hate Women: From Incels and Pickup Artists, the Truth About Extreme Misogyny and How It Affects Us All* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2020). Based on his decades of research, David Buss concludes that “the hard, cruel fact [is that] women tend to be attracted primarily to men in the top twentieth percentile. This gives women the upper hand in the sexual marketplace”; Buss, *When Men Behave Badly*.

- 54 Baseline, “Analyzing Incels.” A common incel typology divides men and women into simplistic representations based on traits and mating success. Men with mate values 1–3 are “incels,” 4–7 are “normies” who must settle for long-term mating, and 8–10 are “Chads,” whom women choose also for short-term mating. Women are divided into two groups. Those with mate values 1–7 are “normies” who have sex with “Chads” and pair-bond with “normies.” Those of values 8–10 are “Stacys,” attractive, superficial women who pair-bond with “Chads.” “Beckys” are less attractive but promiscuous women; Sande, “Verdiløse menn.” The incel understanding of female mate preferences is often reductive. Their forums tend to offer cartoonish depictions of successful men, so-called “alphas,” with muscular physiques, exceptional symmetry, and dominant behavior. Costello et al. found that incels underestimate women’s attraction to “intelligence, kindness and understanding, loyalty and dependability, and humor”; Costello et al., “The Mating Psychology of Incels.”
- 55 S1e4m16.
- 56 Apostolou, *Sexual Selection in Homo sapiens*.
- 57 Buss, *When Men Behave Badly*. The term “attractive” refers not only to looks but to a person’s general attractiveness as a short-term partner.
- 58 Harper et al., “Changes in the Distribution of Sex Partners.”
- 59 Seksualvaneundersøkelsen, 2020, <https://www.sv.uio.no/psi/forskning/prosjekter/seksualvaneundersokelsen/>; Bente Træen et al., *Rapport fra seksualvaneundersøkelsen i 1987, 1992, 1997 og 2002* (Oslo: Nasjonalt folkehelseinstitutt, 2003).
- 60 Medium, “Tinder experiments II: Guys, unless you are really hot you are probably better off not wasting your time on Tinder — a quantitative socio-economic study,” 2015, <https://medium.com/@worstonlinedater/tinder-experiments-ii-guys-unless-you-are-really-hot-you-are-probably-better-off-not-wasting-your-2ddf370a6e9a>.
- 61 Nick Bilton, “Tinder, the Fast-Growing Dating App, Taps an Age-Old Truth,” *New York Times*, October 30, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/30/fashion/tinder-the-fast-growing-dating-app-taps-an-age-old-truth.html>.
- 62 Brayden Gerrard, “Why Do Women Have the Upper Hand on Tinder?” *Medium*, March 8, 2021, <https://thebolditalic.com/the-two-worlds-of-tinder-f1c34e800db4>.
- 63 Brecht Neyt et al., “Are Men Intimidated by Highly Educated Women? Undercover on Tinder,” *Economics of Education Review* 73 (2019): 101914.
- 64 Aviv Goldgeier, “What’s the Biggest Challenge Men Face on Dating Apps? A Q&A with Aviv Goldgeier, Junior Growth Engineer,” Hinge IRL: Advice and Insights for Modern Daters, 2017.
- 65 Incels report matching with far fewer women on Tinder, and they less frequently than other men receive a response after matching, making their experiences with dating apps more negative; Sparks et al., “Involuntary Celibacy.”
- 66 Gerrard, “Why Do Women Have the Upper Hand on Tinder?”

- 67 Trond Viggo Grøntvedt et al., “Hook, Line, and Sinkers: Do Tinder Matches and Meet Ups Lead to One-Night Stands?” *Evolutionary Psychological Science* 6 (2020): 109–18.
- 68 While online dating can be ineffective for average men, it can be soul-crushing for men of below-average attractiveness. A Harvard-educated engineer posted on X a chart of his dating efforts over the past four years. He reported having engaged with 47,842 online profiles. He swiped right 43,496 times, which led to 298 matches. Of these, 27 were bots, 216 did not respond, while 22 women sent him more than 5 messages. Two agreed to meet him for a date, but both stood him up; https://www.linkedin.com/posts/gregor-eistert_so-i-just-saw-this-on-twitter-pardon-i-activity-7097843393107476480-Ab6u. A Norwegian engineer had a similar experience; <https://klassekampen.no/artikkel/2024-04-20/farsfiguren>. A Norwegian teacher swiped right on more than two hundred thousand Tinder profiles in ten years. The effort earned him eight failed dates; <https://www.nettavisen.no/tinder/dating/menn/morten-har-liket-hundretusenvis-av-kvinner-pa-tinder-resultat-atte-dates/f/5-95-1804552>.
- 69 S1e8m13.
- 70 S1e8m15.
- 71 Fredrik Langeland et al., “I de sosiale ytterkantene. Konstruksjoner av kjønn og maskuliniteter hos norske menn i ufrivillig sølibat,” *Tidsskrift for kjønnsforskning* 46 (2022): 208–21.
- 72 S3e7m15–6.
- 73 S3e4m18.
- 74 S3e8m1.
- 75 David M. Buss et al., “Sex Differences in Jealousy: Evolution, Physiology, and Psychology,” *Psychological Science* 3.4 (1992): 251–6; Martin Daly et al., “Male Sexual Jealousy,” *Ethology and Sociobiology* 3 (1982): 11–27; Margo Wilson and Martin Daly, “The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Chattel,” in Jerome H. Barkow, Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby, eds., *The Adapted Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 289–322.
- 76 Clark and Hatfield, “Gender Differences in Receptivity to Sexual Offers”; Buss and Schmitt, “Sexual Strategies Theory.”
- 77 Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family*; Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy*.
- 78 S3e2m13.
- 79 Goetz et al., “Evolutionary Mismatch in Mating.”
- 80 S3e8m9–10.
- 81 Peter K. Jonason and David M. Buss, “Avoiding Entangling Commitments: Tactics for Implementing a Short-Term Mating Strategy,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 52.5 (2012): 606–10, 607.
- 82 S3e7m13.
- 83 Kuhlin, “Amanda Romare ger röst åt inceltjejerna.”
- 84 For narrative efficacy, Romare reduces this period to one year in the novel.
- 85 Buss and Schmitt, “Sexual Strategies Theory”; Buss, “Sexual Conflict in Human Mating.”
- 86 Kuhlin, “Amanda Romare ger röst åt inceltjejerna.”
- 87 Axfors, “Horace verkar ha rätt—dejting är som et krig”; Barr, “Hemsk insikt”; Köljning, “Var finns kvinnliga incels?”
- 88 Ulrika Ahlberg, “Hon blev dumpad om och om igen,” *Hallands Nyheter*, April 22, 2023, 40–1.

- 89 I refer to the author as Romare and her partly autobiographical protagonist as Amanda.
- 90 When citing from *Half of Malmö*, I offer page numbers in parentheses.
- 91 We may be living in a golden age for sexy male “blondes.” Both men and women want intelligent long-term mates. For short-term partners, research has shown that men will accept far lower intelligence, a preference that informs the “sexy dumb blonde” stereotype. Surveys have shown that women accept only slightly lower intelligence in a one-night stand, which has been interpreted as a consequence of our female ancestors’ greater minimal parental investment. Similar to women’s strong preference for good looks with regard to short-term mating, they have been incentivized to emphasize intelligence, so that in the case of a pregnancy without paternal investment, at least the offspring would get smart genes. Effective contraceptives may have changed these preferences. The initial findings of Matthew Espinosa and Sarah Hill indicate that women on birth control place almost as little emphasis on intelligence as men do when it comes to casual sex. If these findings can be replicated, post-1960s short-term markets may have facilitated a promiscuous golden age for sexy male “blondes”; Douglas T. Kenrick et al., “Evolution, Traits, and the Stages of Human Courtship: Qualifying the Parental Investment Model,” *Journal of Personality* 58 (1990): 97–116; Matthew Espinosa and Sarah E. Hill, “Birth Control and Sexual Unrestrictedness: Variability in Sex Differences,” conference presentation, Northeastern Evolutionary Psychology Society Conference, New Paltz, NY, United States, 2023, April 20–22.
- 92 Leif E. O. Kennair et al., “Perceived Effectiveness of Flirtation Tactics: The Effects of Sex, Mating Context and Individual Differences in US and Norwegian Samples,” *Evolutionary Psychology* 20.1 (2022): 14747049221088011.
- 93 Buss, “Sexual Conflict in Human Mating.”
- 94 Randy Thornhill and Steven W. Gangestad, “Human Fluctuating Asymmetry and Human Sexual Behaviour,” *Psychological Science* 5 (1994): 297–302; Steven W. Gangestad and Randy Thornhill, “The Evolutionary Psychology of Extrapair Sex: The Role of Fluctuating Asymmetry,” *Evolution and Human Behavior* 18 (1997): 69–88.
- 95 Buss and Schmitt, “Sexual Strategies Theory”; Martie G. Haselton and David M. Buss, “The Affective Shift Hypothesis: Emotional Reactions Following First-Time Sexual Intercourse,” *Personal Relationships* 8 (2001): 357–69.
- 96 Buss and Schmitt, “Sexual Strategies Theory”; Buss, *The Evolution of Desire*.
- 97 Bendixen et al., “Adjusting Signals of Sexual Interest.”
- 98 Bendixen et al., “Adjusting Signals of Sexual Interest.”
- 99 Haselton and Buss, “The Affective Shift Hypothesis.”
- 100 Kennair et al., “Perceived Effectiveness of Flirtation Tactics.”
- 101 Leif E. O. Kennair et al., “The Function of Casual Sex Action and Inaction Regret: A Longitudinal Investigation,” *Evolutionary Psychology* 19.1 (2021).
- 102 Romare offers a decidedly unromantic portrayal of attraction. Not a single one of her dates appears to be a good match for her, and their interaction leads nowhere, yet Amanda falls hard for most of them. First, the high-value men trigger her promiscuous attraction system. When they later trigger her pair-bonding attraction system, Amanda interprets this to be a result not of compatible hearts but of the men’s disinterest in her. Attraction is portrayed as an animalistic mating instinct that is stronger the greater the other person’s mate value is. From her perspective of confluent love, Romare reveals how

- romantic love mostly is an outdated cultural script to which some people cling. Her dramatization of twenty-first century dating rejects the ideals of two people being meant for each other and strong emotions signaling that they should merge through a pair-bond.
- 103 Kuhlin, “Amanda Romare ger röst åt inceltjejerna.”
- 104 David M. Buss and Todd K. Shackelford, “Attractive Women Want It All: Good Genes, Economic Investment, Parenting Proclivities, and Emotional Commitment,” *Evolutionary Psychology* 6 (2008).
- 105 Jonason and Buss, “Avoiding Entangling Commitments”; Carter et al., “The Dark Triad Personality.”
- 106 Buss, *When Men Behave Badly*.
- 107 Severi Luoto, “An Updated Theoretical Framework for Human Sexual Selection: From Ecology, Genetics, and Life History to Extended Phenotypes,” *Adaptive Human Behavior and Physiology* 5 (2019): 48–102; Kathryn V. Walter et al., “Sex Differences in Mate Preferences across 45 Countries: A Large-Scale Replication,” *Psychological Science* 31 (2020): 408–23.
- 108 Goetz et al., “Evolutionary Mismatch in Mating.”
- 109 Romare proposes several solutions: that we (1) return to the analog dating of the twentieth century; (2) implement a basic income so we can make dating our full-time job; (3) leave our physical bodies to live in a virtual reality; (4) use DNA to find the best match; (5) reproduce with friends and cuddle with dogs; (6) mate with AI androids that can offer the love and confirmation that twenty-first-century denizens have come to crave; Amanda Romare, “Det är så jävla ensamt,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, April 3, 2022, 14–7.
- 110 Leif E. O. Kennair et al., “Examining the Sexual Double Standards and Hypocrisy in Partner Suitability Appraisals within a Norwegian Sample,” *Evolutionary Psychology* 21.1 (2023).
- 111 Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*.
- 112 Illouz, *The End of Love*.
- 113 Sigurd’s friend, Mats, expresses this core tenet of confluent love: “All relationships are a transaction”; s3e4m9.
- 114 Marie Bergström, *The New Laws of Love: Online Dating and the Privatization of Intimacy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022).
- 115 Kennair et al., “Sexual Regret.” Apostolou suggests that many men’s poor sex skills, and many women’s low ability to enjoy sex, could be due to mismatch. With parental choice and premarital chastity, our ancestors faced weak pressures for sexual enjoyment. In fact, it could have been adaptive for men to be premature ejaculators. As we explored in the introductory chapter, reproduction was often a result of intertribal raiding and assaults. Men who needed considerable time to complete an intercourse left themselves vulnerable for attack; Apostolou, *Sexual Selection in Homo sapiens*.
- 116 <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/tinder-price-change-premium-select-b2419016.html>.
- 117 Jonason and Buss, “Avoiding Entangling Commitments.”
- 118 Buss, “Sexual Conflict in Human Mating.”
- 119 Ernst Olav Botnen et al., “Individual Differences in Sociosexuality Predict Picture-Based Mobile Dating App Use,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 131 (2018): 67–73; Grøntvedt et al., “Hook, Line, and Sinkers.”
- 120 Gavrilets, “Human Origins.”
- 121 Goetz et al., “Evolutionary Mismatch in Mating.”

- 122 Jose C. Yong et al., “When Social Status Gets in the Way of Reproduction in Modern Settings: An Evolutionary Mismatch Perspective,” *Culture and Evolution* 20.1 (2024): 59–76.
- 123 Goetz et al., “Evolutionary Mismatch in Mating.”
- 124 Judith A. Easton et al., “Reproduction Expediting: Sexual Motivations, Fantasies, and the Ticking Biological Clock,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 49.5 (2010): 516–20.
- 125 Linn E. Leigland, “Dating i 2021: Hjertesukk fra singel kvinne (32),” VG, August 6, 2021, <https://www.vg.no/nyheter/meninger/i/04ezkM/dating-i-2021-hjertesukk-fra-singel-kvinne-32>; Kari Ø. Heia, “Lei av singel-livet,” *Dagbladet*, August 3, 2023, <https://www.dagbladet.no/kjendis/lei-av-singellivet/80004456>; Merete Sillesen, “Hilde (41) er drittlei ‘fuckboys på førti,’” *KK*, December 9, 2023, <https://www.kk.no/livet/hilde-41-er-drittlei-fuckboys-pa-forti-1/80631885>; Johanne Bille, “Singel og lei,” *Dagbladet Magasinet*, November 25, 2023, 38–40.
- 126 Sparks et al., “Involuntary Celibacy.”
- 127 Some women identify as voluntary singles. These are often women who, consciously or pre-consciously, conclude that their mate value is too low for them to be able to attract a mate with sufficient value to make pair-bonding appear attractive. They may also conclude that the cost of participating on today’s dysfunctional mating markets is too high to justify the pursuit of a pair-bond. Celibate women are mostly a subgroup of insings. Choosing sexual inactivity is often a consequence of facing unconvincing mating prospects and/or having suffered too much pain from postcoital rejection. Unable to draw satisfaction from mating, celibate or involuntarily single women often seek fulfillment from other arenas, such as work or friendships; Menelaos Apostolou and Chistoforos Christoforou, “What Makes Single Life Attractive: An Explorative Examination of the Advantages of Singlehood,” *Evolutionary Psychology* 8 (2022): 403–12; Oliver Sng and Joshua M. Ackerman, “Too Many People, Women, Men? The Psychological Effects of Population Density and Sex Ratio,” *Current Opinion in Psychology* 32 (2020): 38–42.
- 128 Apostolou, *Sexual Selection in Homo sapiens*.
- 129 Kennair and Biegler, “Conflicting Tastes”; Biegler and Kennair, “Sisterly Love.”
- 130 Apostolou, *Sexual Selection in Homo sapiens*. How the ideology of confluent love makes childlessness a fully good option pulls in the same direction.
- 131 Apostolou encourages more empirical research on mating mismatch. After the foundational work of Symons, this element of mating has only intermittently been engaged by evolutionary scholars; Donald Symons, *The Evolution of Human Sexuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).
- 132 Bergløff, “Det nye singelnorge”; Fry and Parker, “Rising Share.”
- 133 Gelles-Watnick, “For Valentine’s Day.”
- 134 Ueda et al., “Trends in Frequency.”
- 135 Ingraham, “Young Male Virginity on the Rise.”
- 136 Ueda et al., “Trends in Frequency.”
- 137 BRC, “What Percentage.”
- 138 <https://twitter.com/zubymusic/status/1707510669640147214?s=12&t=JfQGiz8vcrQAmhb8HBPpbg>.
- 139 Axfors, “Horace verkar ha rätt—dejting är som et krig”; Barr, “Hemsk insikt.”
- 140 Stokstad, “Dumpet av halve Malmö.”

- 141 Romare illustrates in her novel that she is aware of there being what I term high- and low-value men. A male character is yelled at by his girlfriend: “You cannot act like that when you are only a fucking 6.” The narrator comments, “Doesn’t she have a point?” (118). The female characters clearly treat low- and high-value men differently and expect different behavior from them. We see the same in *Sigurd*.
- 142 Nossen, “Kjære Dplay”; Rustad, “Trist sex-serie”; Costello et al., “Levels of Well-Being Among Men Who Are Incel.” The fact that women’s increasing discrimination results in a mating stratification that reduces many men’s quality of life does not mean that women are “at fault” or “responsible.” I merely point to the consequences of contemporary mating markets.
- 143 Incels.co, “Survey results—March 2020,” <https://incels.co/threads/survey-results-march-2020.188748/page-3>.
- 144 Mads Larsen et al., “A Multilevel Selection Model for Prosocial Well-Being,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 14 (2023): 1068119.
- 145 A paradox that seems to contradict that happiness derives from solving adaptively relevant challenges is how having children reduces marital happiness. Sarah Hill and David Buss suggest several possible proximate causes to this conundrum, for instance, that modern couples lack a large network of extended kin; Sarah E. Hill and David M. Buss, “Evolution and Subjective Well-Being,” in Michael Eid and Randy J. Larsen, eds., *The Science of Subjective Well-Being* (New York: The Guilford Press, 2008), 62–79.
- 146 Rustad, “Trist sex-serie.”
- 147 Karolin Grunau et al., “Unwanted Celibacy Is Associated with Misogynistic Attitudes Even After Controlling for Personality,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 199 (2022): 111860.
- 148 Robert C. Brooks et al., “Incel Activity on Social Media Linked to Local Mating Ecology,” *Psychological Science* 33.2 (2022): 249–58.
- 149 Osmo Kontula, “Yhdyntätrendit,” 2016, <https://www.vaestoliitto.fi/artikkelit/finsex-yhdyntatrendit/>.
- 150 Osmo Kontula, “FINSEX: Miesten yleisimmät seksuaaliongelmät,” <https://www.vaestoliitto.fi/artikkelit/finsex-miesten-yleisimmat-seksuaaliongelmät/>.
- 151 Jan Christoffer Andersen, “The Symbolic Boundary Work of Incels: Subcultural Negotiation of Meaning and Identity Online,” *Deviant Behavior* 44.7 (2022): 1081–101.
- 152 The libertarian economist Robin Hanson is among the few public voices who have offered incels understanding and support. He writes, “One might plausibly argue that those with much less access to sex suffer to a similar degree as those with low income, and might similarly hope to gain from organizing around this identity, to lobby for redistribution along this axis and to at least implicitly threaten violence if their demands are not met . . . Sex could be directly redistributed, or cash might be redistributed in compensation.” In response, Hanson was derided as “America’s Creepiest Economist”; cited in Perry, *The Case Against the Sexual Revolution*.
- 153 Involuntary singledom is associated with loneliness, sadness, and low life satisfaction; Menelaos Apostolou et al., “The Emotional Cost of Poor Mating Performance,” *Personality and Individual Differences* 138 (2019): 188–92; Costello et al., “Levels of Well-Being Among Men Who Are Incel.”
- 154 Costello and Buss, “Why Isn’t There More Incel Violence?”
- 155 Blake and Brooks, “Societies Should Not Ignore Their Incel Problem.”

- 156 Porn use could drive a vicious cycle for sexually marginalized men. Other male-driven factors could also contribute to sexual inactivity, such as decreased testosterone levels and the use of digital media; Park et al., “Is Internet Pornography Causing Sexual Dysfunctions?”; Trivison et al., “A Population-Level Decline in Serum Testosterone Levels in American Men”; Sansone et al., “Relationship Between Use of Videogames and Sexual Health in Adult Males.” Studies show that porn functions like a low-cost substitute for female sexuality. High porn use makes demand for real sex decrease, contributes to less heterosexual marriage, makes it more likely that an ongoing relationship will end, and makes men more interested in short-term mating; Brooks, *Artificial Intimacy*.
- 157 The glaring exceptions are the incel mass murder events, such as Isla Vista (2014), Oregon (2015), Toronto (2018), Hanau (2020), and Plymouth (2022); Tietjen and Tirkkonen, “The Rage of Lonely Men.” Rolf Lindgren, a Norwegian psychologist, argues that Anders Behring Breivik—who in 2011 murdered 77 people in and around Oslo—primarily was motivated by his incel experiences; Rolf M. B. Lindgren, “Menn som ikke får sex,” *Dagbladet*, May 8, 2018, <https://www.dagbladet.no/kultur/menn-som-ikke-far-sex/69785741>.
- 158 While female insings struggle without resorting to terrorism, also their suffering should be subject to more research. In the premodern world, female singledom was far less common than it is today. The EMP was characterized by its exceptionally high proportion of never-married women, but this was typically no higher than 10%. In some environments, the proportion could rise to 20%. In Southern Europe, the number was 2–5%; Coontz, *Marriage, a History*. In many of the environments of our polygynous past, mostly all women were bonded to a man.
- 159 Romare, “År jag Sveriges enda incellkvinna?”
- 160 Robert Sapolsky, *Determined: A Science of Life without Free Will* (New York: Penguin, 2023).
- 161 Heia, “Lei av singellivet.”
- 162 Leigland, “Dating i 2021.”
- 163 Sillesen, “Hilde (41) er drittlei ‘fuckboys på førti.’”
- 164 Bille, “Singel og lei.”

Conclusion

The Upcoming Fourth Sexual Revolution

We can find both inspiration and consolation in studying the past. Our present era's mating dysfunction does not entail Western communities standing for the first time in front of something that could feel like an abyss, one we might not be able to traverse. Our mating beliefs are so foundational that transitions can feel not only unworkable but sacrilegious. Our biological impulses may also work counter to what a new social order requires. It typically took two to three centuries to wean European communities off the Marriage and Family Practices (MFPs) that had undergirded their polygynous kinship societies.¹ Church MFPs had to be imposed with prolonged indoctrination and coercion. All of the transitions we have investigated were bemoaned and resisted. Edward Shorter writes that, when the EMP unraveled in the mid-eighteenth century, there was a crescendo of complaints about the immorality of the young. People had perhaps not been as morally outraged since their ancestors had admonished the sexual laxness of the fifteenth century.² The Modern Breakthrough was also seen as an abomination, representing a secularization of thought and behavior that some feared would make God abandon the West. In the interwar years, it could appear as if their fears had not been unfounded; a drop in fertility below replacement levels triggered concerns similar to those we have today. Scandinavia responded with social democratic welfare to incentivize baby-making, and other Western nations responded similarly. Post-World War II optimism and prosperity took care of the rest.³

The journey of Western mating chronicled in this study suggests that we should have a chance at solving also today's challenges. We never failed before. Psychologically, it has been costly having to adapt to a succession of mating moralities; for equanimity, stability is preferable. But, from the perspective of our genes, this study has traced a phenomenal success. At the time of the First Sexual Revolution, around 360 million people inhabited the planet—by the Second, 770 million.⁴ By the Third Sexual Revolution, the innovation unleashed by the Church's dissolving of conformist kinship societies had provided technology that fed 3.5 billion humans.⁵ Between

the First and Second Sexual Revolutions, the nuptial valve of the EMP had underpinned a cultural evolution that led to industrial revolutions that would greatly reduce Malthusian restraints. As we near the Fourth Sexual Revolution, we have living replicas of more than 8 billion human DNA. From a global evolutionary perspective, these sexual revolutions have, so far, been astoundingly adaptive. They have also put us in exceptional peril. In addition to a demographic collapse, we face challenges from—just to mention a few—climate change, resource strain, nuclear war, and a line of existential threats arising from the technologies of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.⁶

If the human success story is to continue, it seems imperative that we forge a new global order. Historian Yuval Harari fears that, in the short run, the economics of automation and artificial intelligence (AI) will impoverish many countries, triggering mass emigration and global instability. Physicist Max Tegmark fears that if we fail to get AI right, there is a 50% risk of our species going extinct by 2100.⁷ For these and several other challenges, there seems only to exist global solutions. In this context, as often is the case, mating might not intuitively seem that important. But, as always, our mating practices comprise the foundation upon which everything else rests. Which moralities for copulation, pair-bonding, and reproduction could optimize for global cooperation and well-being, I do not know; we will have to find out—this is one of the great challenges of our time. As we in the years ahead consider which practices could be better suited for our new environment, we should resist the intuitions that tell us that our current mating beliefs and practices are superior. A deeper understanding of how we got to where we are can help us accept the relativity of our beliefs. Drawing insights from the hominin journey might also help us better perceive what our options are and which practices could lead to better lives for more people. After recounting this 6-million-year journey, and the insights we can draw from it, I share how a handful of Scandinavian storytellers envision the future of mating.

A Heart Divided by Sexual Revolutions

As far as I know, I am the first to conceptualize today's Western mating as a result of three sexual revolutions. In pop culture, there is only *the* sexual revolution, that of the 1960s. In 1975, Edward Shorter connected his era's transformation to that of the mid-eighteenth century, referring to these as the First and Second Sexual Revolutions.⁸ More recent research on the origins of modernity makes me include the Gregorian Reform, which established lifelong monogamy as the only acceptable frame for copulation and pair-bonding.⁹ This was the revolution that set the West on a unique course. I am not convinced that *the* sexual revolution, the third one, will be

considered an independent one if there are scholars around a century from now. If we place primacy on who the authority is in matters of mating, 1968 represented but the culmination of what accelerated from around 1750. The First Sexual Revolution had transferred authority from the kin group to the nuclear family. The Second Sexual Revolution granted the power of mate selection to the individual—although it would take more than two centuries before the Western environment could support a universalization of this unprecedented change, that is, to allow “free love” both on long- and short-term markets.¹⁰

Never before had human communities granted such independence. *Homo sapiens* had been “the only species on the planet where males are selected by other males for reproductive purposes.”¹¹ Much of today’s mating dysfunction results from how we are still trying to adapt to this regime of individual choice, which was made possible but also complicated by effective contraceptives. No wonder we remain confused. For such transitions, half a century is not much. These decades have also been marked by enormous social and technological change, which further complicates our search for a new equilibrium. My impression is that we are in the process of realizing that no equilibrium exists. The confluent utopia of “free love” was meant to liberate women—and men—from cultural oppression so that members of both sexes could live out their innate desires. Instead, low-value men are excluded from short-term markets. Women get “free sex” with the high-value men they desire the most but rarely their love. Sigurd the Incel and Amanda the Insing symbolize that the confluent regime is now peaking, similar to what the romantic one did in the 1950s. When we have revealed that the utopia of our mating ideology is, in fact, a utopia, it is time to move on. Even if there was a confluent equilibrium to be found, it would be short-lived. The upcoming Fourth Sexual Revolution—which I symbolically place in 2029¹²—will force us to search for new solutions.

These are the four revolutions of my typology, but to understand why today’s mating markets are increasingly burdened by stratification, marginalization, and discontent, we must consider two more sexual revolutions. Our mating practices are best understood from a historical perspective of five deep transitions.¹³ In the typology I devised for this study, I did not include the first transitions since early hominins and the first agriculturalists did not leave recorded fiction to which I could dedicate separate chapters. Were I not an evolutionary literary critic, I may have offered six sexual revolutions, including the upcoming one (Figure 11.1).¹⁴

The first, most consequential transition—the Pair-Bonding Revolution of our hominin forebears—informs the conflicting impulses of our divided hearts. Without this transition, we would not have evolved to become such brainy apes,¹⁵ but it left our lineage with two disparate attraction systems.¹⁶ Early hominins had practiced the most common form of reproduction for

Hominin Mating Revolutions					
Pair-Bonding Revolution	Neolithic Revolution	First Sexual Revolution	Second Sexual Revolution	Third Sexual Revolution	Fourth Sexual Revolution
4mya	12kya	1200	1750	1968	2029

Figure 11.1 Six sexual revolutions.

vertebrates. Promiscuous mating allows populations to adapt more effectively to environmental change, as strong sexual selection more quickly spreads beneficial genes than if a population breeds monogamously or had to rely on natural selection alone. The *promiscuous attraction system* of hominin females compelled them to mate predominantly with the most successful males. Females gradually faced a more complicated choice. A changing ecology made it an increasingly beneficial strategy to have fathers contribute with calories and protection. To motivate males to become such fathers, and females to breed also with low-value males, both sexes evolved a *pair-bonding attraction system*, one that motivated cooperation through the offspring's most vulnerable phase. The Pair-Bonding Revolution began 4–6 million years ago and was completed around 2 million years ago, when monogamous pair-bonds had become the *Homo* norm.¹⁷ This transition—the evolution of romantic love—created humans, as there would have been no genus *Homo* without it.¹⁸ But it left our hearts divided—or expressed less poetically, the Pair-Bonding Revolution complicated the biochemical algorithm of human attraction.

Females still felt strongly drawn to the most attractive males, but as increasingly needy offspring had made paternal investment highly advantageous, necessity drove assortative mating. Conceivably, females could have continued to get genetic contributions from superior males while having lower-value males work for the good of their offspring, but evolution did not turn male hominins into the equivalent of worker ants. Our male ancestors were mostly willing to help out if the female allowed them to directly further their genetic legacy—or at least believe that they did.

Some men had such superior genes that the resulting hunting prowess, or social position, let them provide for multiple mates. This diversity did not drive rampant woman-hoarding, as the forager ecology restricted polygynous practices. During the last few tens of thousands of years in the run up to the agricultural revolution, increasing social complexity and stratification empowered superior men,¹⁹ but the forager mating pattern remained intact. Their communities consisted of pairs of provisioning men and largely faithful women, plus a few polygynists and promiscuous maters.²⁰ Functionality required that mating decisions primarily be guided by people's pair-bonding attraction system. To convince individuals of the

necessity of this—and of much else—our species had developed a new technology: made-up stories.²¹ Around campfires at night, children likely heard tales that told them how to deal with desire, increase their status, and attract a suitable mate. These stories conveyed the norms and values appropriate for their distinct community regarding serial monogamy, extrapair copulation, and polygynous aspirations. After our species' creative revolution around 70,000 years ago,²² our capacity for fiction has let us impart morality via invented stories. We moderns would perhaps find these campfire tales surprisingly liberal, as the forager ecology permitted a level of individual freedom that the agricultural one would not.

The Neolithic Revolution tied our ancestors to fields. To protect these fields, they had to organize in tight-knit, sedentary kin groups, typically with strong patriarchal hierarchies. The men at the top could control agricultural surpluses—or, in the case of pastoralism, the surpluses from herds—which allowed them to provide for many women and their offspring. The Neolithic Revolution drove an increase in polygyny and lifelong pair-bonds. In the millennia that followed, practices varied between environments. Good times generally drove social stratification, which led to more polygyny. Bad times generally made fewer men able to afford several women, which drove monogamy.²³ Really bad times required different adaptations. Historian Jenny Jochens suggests that “during periods of wandering and endemic warfare,” such as the Migration Period (300–700), among the Germanic tribes, “copulation that impregnated females was driven primarily by male sexual aggression.”²⁴ This “marriage by capture” resulted from how the era's instability complicated more formalized mating arrangements.

To us modern humanists, such assaults on individuals are inexcusable. The impersonal prosociality that emerged after the First Sexual Revolution made us grant generous rights and affordances even to strangers. The agricultural age's kinship morality had driven strong outgroup animosity that justified the murder and rape of nonkin. The mating morality of heroic love was an integral part of this worldview—one of us versus everyone else. Again, practices varied, and we do not want to overly generalize, but the post-Neolithic kin group epoch was clearly distinct from that of foragers and that which succeeded the First Sexual Revolution. Naturally, not all pair-bonds were best understood as a result of patriarchal dominance. Nor did all women live in constant fear of having to submit to someone who had murdered their husband or father. Most of the time, life went dully on. This epoch's ideology of mating can profitably be conceptualized as heroic love, but through all times, *Homo* couples have bonded in ways that align with several of this study's mating moralities. The companionate ethos has always marked many marriages, as it also does today. Romantic love has existed at all times, although its strong emotions have

been expressed differently depending on the cultural context. Some people copulated and pair-bonded in accordance with confluent ideals eons before Anthony Giddens popularized the term. Libertine love has been perennially compelling to some. We find practices evocative of courtly love in the literature of many environments after periods of strong economic growth.²⁵ Queer love, too, has existed everywhere and always, under various extents of oppression.

I employed these terms primarily to describe an era's hegemonic mating ideology, not actual relationships. In Figure I.1, I listed these loves consecutively across time, but the type of mating they describe was not historical Western inventions. These forms of love, and others, exist as part of our mating repertoire. They contribute to *Homo sapiens'* exceptional flexibility when responding to environmental demands. Even heroic love remains part of this repertoire. In certain contexts—typically lawless, impoverished ones—we can still be drawn to submit to a powerful mate for protection. As, over the past millennium, the modern world emerged, Westerners drew on different parts of this repertoire to facilitate mating that fit their transforming communities. The concept of *evoked culture*—from Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, who pioneered evolutionary psychology—engages how not all culture is transmitted, that is, learned from previous generations or neighboring peoples. All humans share universal, evolved information-processing mechanisms that are context-dependent. When our ecology changes, certain cultural and behavioral responses are evoked based on predispositions.²⁶ This is also the case with mating.²⁷ As I return to later in this chapter, today's environment seems to evoke in many women a polygynous mindset,²⁸ which—in our monogamous regime—drives promiscuity to the detriment of reproduction. A millennium ago, Europeans had a monogamous mindset evoked by a confluence of novelties.

Night Courting and Bicycles

As Baumard et al. substantiated, high-medieval growth evoked in Europeans a desire to pair-bond guided more by emotions.²⁹ This romantic impulse happened to coincide with the feudal transition, which dissolved kin groups and submitted powerful men to universal law. No longer should marriage primarily be a commercial contract between families. Nor should high-status men rape women. The Church even insisted that, no matter how abundant a man's resources were, he should only mate with one woman. To complicate matters more, that one woman had to consent to both sex and marriage. The First Sexual Revolution was a radical one.

In the Norse region, the Icelandic sagas undermined the previous ethos that had justified assaults and woman-hoarding. Across Europe, tales of

courtly love conveyed ways of thinking around mating that promoted all of these changes. We cannot establish a causality of influence from fiction to behavior, as cultural changes are too complex to untangle to what extent stories affect or merely reflect reality. But as my early chapters showed, fiction can offer valuable insights into the minds of those who struggled with this transition. We can discern their strategies and how cultural psychology evolves. As we saw, *Tristrans saga* embodied both the morality and sociality that would transform Europe in the centuries that followed.

To a far greater extent than the Second and Third Sexual Revolutions, the First was imposed top-down. Christian or courtly notions of the ideal pair-bond were not implemented wholesale. A mating practice that was particularly prominent in the Nordic region exemplifies how local communities adapted to lofty moralities. What contributed to the end of this practice exemplifies another lesson: how new technology can make dysfunctional what used to work. *Night courting* became common in many communities after the First Sexual Revolution. This was a bottom-up response to doctrinal inflexibility. The era's regime of companionate love granted parents the greatest authority in mate selection, and the reigning ideology insisted that copulation should not occur until the wedding night. Folk psychology convinced some communities that a more flexible approach could facilitate better mate selection. To allow young people to explore on their own who might be a good match for whom, people often looked the other way when young men, in the dark of night, visited potential mates.

In one version of night courting, the girl hosts the boy on a loft, or somewhere else on the farm, serving him food and drink. After a period, having entertained multiple prospects, the girl lets it be known whom she likes best. Her chosen mate then asks the father for her hand in marriage. In another version, the girl and the visiting boy lie on the bed together, fully clothed, while talking through the night. Scholars disagree on how sexualized night courting was. Considering how up to half of Norwegian brides were pregnant, "fully clothed" seems to have been open to interpretation. We can imagine the nocturnal negotiations, hormonal teenagers weighing God against desire, moving step by step toward what would bind them for life; night courting was an efficacious compromise. While the official line on premarital sex was unmistakable, there were varying extents of unspoken acceptance for young people having one sex partner, as long as both understood that they had to get married once the girl became pregnant. It is reasonable to assume that parents with sufficient resources to support the newlyweds would be more open to night courting than those whose offspring would have to accumulate resources before they could establish neolocal residence.

The novel technology that in some regions made night courting less functional was the bicycle. Even a community's most attractive bachelors

could only walk so far in a night. This had limited boys' courting range in a functional manner, making courtship more assortative. With the spread of the bicycle, attractive boys could more easily woo several girls at a time, increasing the risk for local drama and multiple pregnancies.³⁰ This example represents the foundational challenge with individual choice, one that has marked every ideological turn of Western mating. Women's highly discriminatory promiscuous attraction system draws them to a small minority of men. These men also tend to be more immediately compelling to women's pair-bonding attraction system. Due to the difference between male and female mate preferences, women can often get sexual access to these high-value men, but there are not enough of them for every woman to pair-bond with one.

Before effective contraceptives and legal abortion, having sex with a man unwilling to bond could result in high costs being imposed on the woman. Pre-Third Sexual Revolution mating moralities must be understood in this context. Arranged marriage and premarital chastity were means that affected women's mating emotions in a manner that facilitated assortative mating; they were meant to reconcile the conflicting impulses of the female heart. Night courting was also an effective means for as long as mostly long-term-oriented, similar-value boys were given the opportunity to trigger the girl's love mechanism through long nights of talking under a shared blanket.³¹ In monogamous regimes, suitable courtship practices are those that give men and women sufficient time to get to know each other, so that if they are compatible, their pair-bonding attraction systems have time to work their neural magic.

In the earlier polygynous regimes, mate distribution had largely been a patriarchal responsibility. Not that the mate preferences of individuals did not matter, but whom young women—and men—desired tended to be less important. The First Sexual Revolution triggered a cultural evolution which, gradually, let female mate preferences become the main driver of mating games. After this transition set Western women on a path of empowerment, a perennial concern has been how to engender morality that counters certain female mating impulses, especially those driving *hypergyny*, that is, women's desire for higher-value mates.³² Extrapair copulation—and female promiscuity in general—tend to be directed at men with whom they would be less likely to pair-bond in a monogamous regime.³³ In *The Unfaithful Wife*, we saw these predispositions play out. Such dynamics inform why, when Western moralities have cracked down on unsanctioned mating, the heavier moral burden has tended to befall women. This begs the question: what about men's impulses, could not they be countered? Why did the Church delegitimize—or even demonize—*female* sexuality every time it decided to restrain promiscuity?

Previously, in passing, I offered the answer that women are the sexual selectors. This is a complicated issue, but I think the answer, at the deepest level, has to do with women's greater choosiness for short-term mates. In markets of individual choice—such as those in today's West or that for illicit copulation in *The Unfaithful Wife*—it is primarily the woman who decides if courtship will result in sex. Morality that imposes large costs on non-marital copulation motivates women to reject men. Still, could it not be an alternative to impose so large costs on promiscuous men that they refrained from soliciting unsanctioned sex? Theoretically, perhaps; history does not lack examples of men severely punished for illicit sex. Grave sanctions do influence behavior, but men are so much more strongly driven to pursue new partners that it would require a lot more to discourage them.³⁴ Through our evolutionary past, women have to a significant extent rewarded promiscuous men with mating opportunity, which has shaped male psychology. Biologist Robert Smith writes, "The biological irony of the double standard is that males could not have been selected for promiscuity if historically females had always denied them opportunity for expression of the trait."³⁵

This perspective does not justify the Church's oppression of female sexuality but illuminates why men's sexuality evolved as it did, which informed the Church's antipromiscuity strategies. From an evolutionary perspective, nothing was more important to our male ancestors than to attract a mate with whom they could reproduce. The men who failed—which was more than half of them³⁶—did not become our ancestors. Facing strong sexual competition, a promiscuous drive often gave men an advantage, as did a hunger for power. Patriarchal structures can be explained by men's desire for amassing resources and status, but this desire evolved because females reward the males who succeed in such power games.³⁷ If women's mate preferences had been different, men would be different. Evolutionary anthropologist Sarah Hrdy quips: "Men are one long breeding experiment run by women."³⁸ We cannot rule out that, in a different environment, a morality could have emerged that placed the greater moral burden on men for remaining chaste. But given Christian doctrine and the Germanic tribes' patriarchal legacy, the Church seems to have opted for the most effective means at their disposal for restricting population growth, as infanticide was no longer an option.

A second question that could be asked is: why not let women live out their desire for mating with the most attractive men? After all, promiscuous mating is the dominant form of reproduction for vertebrates. The Pair-Bonding Revolution was but a response to a changed environment. The Fourth Sexual Revolution is set to be a response to a far more dramatically changed environment. For the sake of argument, we could imagine a more matriarchal order in which men with high mate value are distributed

for reproduction and recreational copulation, while lower-value men are relegated to doing labor in service of societal needs. Similar to the mating ideology I identified in *Baby Jane*, such a social order would form a symmetry with those underpinned by antiquity's heroic love. Some communities are moving in this direction. As patriarchal structures have been dismantled more thoroughly in Scandinavia than anywhere else, a mating regime has emerged that is slightly evocative of what I more provocatively outlined above, one that I elaborate on in the next section. Such an outcome seems inherent with Western modernity's embrace of individual choice under the aegis of confluent love. Given the difference between the sexes' mate preferences, one of the predictable outcomes of female empowerment is an increasing marginalization of low-value men.

The Gender Welfare Gap

The period from 1750 to 1968 can be viewed as one long negotiation over how to construct a mating regime that facilitates what increasingly individualistic Westerners desired: to choose their own mates. This was not primarily a question of morality, as two material prerequisites had to be in place. The first had been predicted by the authors of the Modern Breakthrough: women had to become financially independent. The other was effective contraceptives. Freed from needing male provisioning and able to disconnect copulation from reproduction, women were empowered to let their behavior be guided by the mate preferences that previous moralities had tried so hard to counter. In *For Lydia*, the protagonist gets to have a sexual relationship with whom she strongly desires but struggles to understand why the sexy, charming, and "almost too well-proportioned" medical student is unwilling to commit.³⁹ Half a century later, to the protagonist in *Half of Malmö*, such dynamics are no more comprehensible.

Of my earlier case studies, only *The Magic Goblet* anticipates how female mate preferences under a regime of individual choice would drive a strong stratification between men. Emilie Flygare-Carlén warned against giving in to these preferences. She encouraged women to select average-value men, but only because her era's women were socially and economically subjugated. What she would have advised for the twenty-first century is anyone's guess.

Ludvig Holberg predicted a class stratification, one that today plays out most prominently in the United States. To meet modern demands for running a household of two working parents, well-off couples hire precarious laborers who often cannot afford their own reproduction. Holberg did not suspect that modernity might lead to more men being excluded from pair-bonding. This is understandable, considering the economics of pre-modern mating markets. Holberg observed how men used their greater

economic means to gain pair-bonding opportunity with women younger and better-looking than them, which his plays condemn. His oeuvre gives the impression that, under a regime of individual choice, assortative mating will put men and women on equal footing. Holberg's only speculation for what might happen once women made their own money was that the well-off would find each other. In Bellman's libertine fantasy world, too, mate attraction was not much of a problem. Tavern girls, like Ulla Winblad, let men pay their way to erotic and romantic adventures. Also in *The Serious Game*, female poverty facilitated men's sexual opportunity.

Necessity has always been an important motivator for a significant proportion of the mating to which women have agreed. Female foragers were dependent on paternal contributions and male protection. Their pair-bonding attraction system therefore only needed to evolve feelings of love that were strong enough to motivate assortative mating for women in relatively great need. In later social orders, too, necessity drove pair-bonding. In patriarchal kinship societies, women could hardly make it on their own. In feudal Europe, prostitution or dire poverty were mostly the alternatives to marriage. As the West industrialized, female employment paid pittances. These contexts strongly incentivized women to pair-bond with the best available man—irrespective of his ability to arouse them.

Post-Third Sexual Revolution gender equality empowered women to pay greater heed to the impulses of their attraction systems. No longer compelled by necessity, more women excluded the lowest-value men from their pool of potential mates. Since then, female choosiness has increased in response to several environmental changes.⁴⁰ The less women need men, the less likely they are to settle for someone who does not sufficiently arouse them—or have compelling enough resources. This predisposition has contributed to our era's increasing singledom and decreasing fertility. As I covered earlier, other factors play in, but twenty-first-century decoupling appears to be an important driver for the demographic collapse that will threaten societal well-being in the generations ahead. Until the present era, individual impulses tempered by culture in a variety of environments led to functional equilibria; individual and communal concerns reconciled. In today's West and in an increasing number of other regions, individual concerns have taken such precedence that communities are steering toward self-eradication.

Unlike in the 1930s, when fertility had also decreased, the customary political means are no longer likely to work.⁴¹ Over the past generations, especially the Nordic nations have grown their welfare states so large that additional transfers are both politically unfeasible and unlikely to have a strong enough effect. In the American discourse around low fertility, a common argument is still that, to bring reproduction back to replacement levels, the obvious means are improved gender equality and more

generous welfare. The Norwegian experience suggests that such a strategy would not work. No country has more socially and economically empowered women. In a 2022 report, Statistics Norway calculated that the average Norwegian woman, over a lifetime, receives \$1.2 million more from the state than she pays in tax. The average man pays more in tax than he receives in support.⁴² This discrepancy pales the effect of the gender pay gap. Such a *gender welfare gap*, however, is functional. Women have lower-paid professions, work shorter hours, are more absent from work, and live longer. They more often end up with child custody after break-ups. Generous welfare is crucial in order to cover reproductive costs in an environment of exceptionally high singledom. Scandinavia has the world's highest occurrence of one-person households: 43–46%.⁴³ As I, in the Introduction chapter, cited David Buss regarding modern Scandinavia: “Tax-payers effectively provide women with what partners otherwise would.”⁴⁴

In a sense, Nordic social democracy has achieved what hominin evolution could not, to make men provide for offspring that are not theirs. This social order was used to explain why, in 2010, while fertility rates elsewhere had long plummeted, Norway's was as high as 2.0. Today, it is 1.4 and sinking.⁴⁵ When not even a transfer of \$1.2 million—in addition to everything else that the Norwegian state does to ease the burden on parents—is enough to motivate sufficient reproduction, the political tool chest looks rather empty. Such intersex redistribution, while functional in many regards, might even have a net negative effect in terms of fertility. Economically independent women can, with greater ease, have children but can struggle to find a man they consider sufficiently compelling. Although women today may to a lesser extent need a man's economic resources, their attraction systems are still drawn to success, which is a relative measure. A man's prosperity is a strong predictor of his relationship status. As I cited in the Introduction chapter, 9 of 10 Norwegian men with high salaries are pair-bonded at age 40. Only 4 out of 10 men with low salaries have the same status.⁴⁶ As women gained increasing economic independence from 1985 to 2012, the proportion of men who had not reproduced by age 45 increased from 14 to 23%.⁴⁷ Approximately over the same period, the proportion of Norwegians not in established relationships increased from 24 to 33%.⁴⁸ Again, we cannot establish precise causalities. Too much has changed during this period for us to untangle the effect of each influence. Still, a confluence of statistics suggests that equality and economic independence are among the factors that motivate women to aim their mating efforts at higher-value men—to the detriment of pair-bonding and reproduction. This is becoming known as the Mating Crisis.⁴⁹

In another sense—regarding mate distribution—we are in a place similar to where our ancestors were before the First Sexual Revolution. Then, men hoarded women based on who did best in patriarchal power games. Today, men hoard women based on who is best at adapting to female

mate preferences on short- and long-term markets. The power has shifted from men to women, but the outcome is similar: a few men have a high number of mates, while many men have few or none. Bellman's libertine utopia has finally been implemented, but only the most attractive men get to participate. Between the First and Third Sexual Revolutions, the Church facilitated a uniquely egalitarian mating environment that made the modern world possible, but this part of Western history is now over.

The above elements are why I suggested that Scandinavia has become slightly evocative of a matriarchal, promiscuous mating regime—although not to a sufficient extent to greatly benefit women. As low-value men are increasingly excluded from mating, also women suffer greater singledom—and more recently, sexual inactivity.⁵⁰ Amanda's struggles in *Half of Malmö* attest to how Anne Mellor's criticism of the Romantics' portrayal of women applies also today: "The role of liberated women in this utopia is but to love, without jealousy or envy or shame."⁵¹ Like her fellow Swede Ulla Winblad, Amanda found that liberation means adapting to the preferences of certain men. Instead of having engineered a poetically just revenge of the matriarchy, we have stumbled into a lose-lose regime of increasing distrust and despondency—as well as a looming demographic collapse.

In terms of the latter, no solutions appear workable. The political means that would be likely to significantly increase fertility all appear—from the perspective of our modern morality—too appalling to consider. We could reverse gender equality, impose poverty, reintroduce polygyny,⁵² strengthen the patriarchy, deurbanize, prohibit contraceptives and abortion, and embrace collectivist ideology.⁵³ I assume no takers. That is why I propose that we must look for deeper solutions, that is, to analyze the consequences of—and question—the mating morality that underpins today's dysfunctional practices.

Sex Ratio Theory and Polygynous Mindsets

Baby Jane, *Sigurd*, and *Half of Malmö* contribute to such a scrutiny. These fictional tales engage different aspects of the marketization of mating that contribute to today's malaise. *Baby Jane* stages how, informed by the morality of confluent love, sex and pair-bonding can be treated as any other goods on commercial markets.⁵⁴ Instead of facilitating intimacy and commitment, confluent ideals often drive shallow reward-maximizing for individualistic ends. *Baby Jane* insists that confluent ideals must be rejected but proposes no alternatives.

Sigurd portrays how the biggest losers are the lowest-value men, who are excluded from both short- and long-term mating. Since Western culture, so far, has been unable to conceptualize that incels are an inevitable product of mating stratification—not excessive gaming—these men are

mostly met with derision instead of sympathy. The TV series offers a penetrating analysis of power differentials but never engages the ideology that undergirds this inequality. It attempts no structural criticism, conveying instead that each incel must embark on a journey of self-improvement to be able to compete more effectively for mates.

Half of Malmö offers a structural perspective on female marginalization. The novel conveys deep, original insights into how modern mating—amplified by dating apps—affects some women’s attitudes and strategies in a manner that makes pair-bonding an unlikely outcome of their dating efforts. Harper et al. showed how increasing stratification was well underway before dating apps became ubiquitous.⁵⁵ Statistics on the evolution of female swipe practices over the past decade suggest that apps, to an increasing extent, channel mating opportunities to a small minority of the most attractive men.⁵⁶ The bicycle gave high-value night courtiers the opportunity to pursue perhaps a handful of girls. Tinder aids the most capable courtiers in acquiring dozens of sex partners or more.

With such abundant access to promiscuous mating, long-term commitment can appear less compelling for the men whom women find most attractive. In 1948—as the romantic regime was about to peak—biologist Alfred Kinsey concluded, “There seems to be no question but that the human male would be promiscuous in his choice of sexual partners throughout the whole of his life if there were no social restrictions.”⁵⁷ Today, confluent ideology has removed those restrictions, although a lack of access still prevents most men from the type of promiscuous participation that Kinsey predicted.

After half a century of “free love,” many women remain incredulous at the mating strategies pursued by promiscuously successful men. A common demand is that short-term-oriented men must signal their intentions honestly:

If people had communicated what they wanted, the dating world would be a better, more honest place. Do you not want to meet again? Be honest. Are you only looking for a casual adventure? Be honest. Like many men, on occasion women can also fancy uncommitted sex, but the intention has to be clear.⁵⁸

From a perspective of prosocial morality, such demands are reasonable. But mating markets are not best understood as prosocial—that is, cooperative—they are about the most competitive arenas we have. Considering how near-impossible it is for many men to succeed on short-term markets, it is naïve to expect complete honesty, especially when such a strategy is all but ensured to elicit rejection. For those men who are mostly unable to arouse women’s promiscuous attraction system, feigning

long-term interest is their strongest card. This informs why 71% of men admit to having lied about pair-bonding emotions in order to get laid.⁵⁹

Such deceit motivates women to protect themselves against being hurt. As we saw in *Half of Malmö*, there is an arms race between men and women on mating markets. Increased competition and stratification incentivize men to become even more deceitful, to which women respond by becoming even more skeptical of men. Intriguingly, this skepticism seems often not to draw women away from the high-value men who do most of the short-term mating. A more promiscuous mating market appears to turn women off primarily from similar-value men. To protect themselves from promiscuous deceit—found Emily Stone, Todd Shackelford, and David Buss—women seem to switch to a polygynous mindset that motivates an even stronger competition for the highest-value men.⁶⁰

Sex ratio theory offers one key to why mating practices have become dysfunctional in the West and other regions.⁶¹ Male and female mate preferences are affected by the ratio between men and women who are available to mate in a given population.⁶² The Classical Hypothesis had predicted that both sexes, when facing a deficit of potential partners, would lower their standards to increase their chance of attracting a mate. Similarly, the Demographic Opportunity Thesis posited that both sexes, if facing a surplus, would engage in more short- and long-term mating.⁶³ Empirical research undermined several of these assumptions.⁶⁴

The Alternative Hypothesis predicts that men and women will respond to a low-ratio context—that is, a deficit of men—in ways that can appear counterintuitive. Instead of raising their standards to attract a higher-value partner, men will lower their standards to have more promiscuous sex. Instead of lowering their standards to attract a mate, women will raise their standards to avoid being deceived by men who seek short-term mating.⁶⁵

The Classical Hypothesis received partial empirical support in that men generally express lower standards when facing a scarcity. Women's response to scarcity is more complex. They compete more fiercely for men, and they do so by catering to male mate preferences. Women permit more uncommitted sex.⁶⁶ They signal promiscuity, for instance, by wearing shorter skirts.⁶⁷ A novel expression of such intrafemale competition, informed by male preferences, is that when high income inequality reduces the proportion of attractive bachelors, women post more sexualized selves.⁶⁸ In spite of these behavioral adaptations, women do not act in line with what the Classical Hypothesis had predicted. When facing scarcity, they typically do not express lower standards for a long-term mate. Instead of marrying down, women often prefer singledom.⁶⁹

But why would this research inform Western mating in general, considering that most environments have quite even ratios? Newer sex ratio studies emphasize that it is not only the actual ratio that affects the sexes' mate

preferences, but the *perceived sex ratio* (PSR).⁷⁰ As modern women have kept raising their standards, many of them perceive that they face a growing deficit of acceptable-value bachelors. A low PSR can evoke responses that may have been adaptive when their female ancestors faced an actual deficit of men but which today are maladaptive. Pair-bonding becomes even more elusive when a low PSR motivates women to increase their discrimination of similar-value men.

Many men also seem to respond maladaptively to present-day promiscuity; female responses are not the only ones accentuating the malaise. Low-value men, whose chances on short-term markets are miniscule, correctly perceive that their environment has an abundance of single women who pursue promiscuous strategies. Yong et al. found that a considerable proportion of these men—as the Alternative Hypothesis predicts—respond by adopting a more promiscuous orientation.⁷¹ The result is expectable: even fewer intersecting supply and demand curves on pair-bonding markets.

Stone, Shackelford, and Buss began by hypothesizing that when women face an environment in which men to a greater extent pursue short-term mating, women have an evolved defense mechanism that makes them adopt higher standards. Sensing that men of similar value are more likely only to want short-term mating, women avoid deception by mentally excluding such men from their pool of potential mates. This mechanism, Stone, Shackelford, and Buss suggest, may have contributed to women's greater reproductive success in our evolutionary past.

In today's environment, there is a confounding factor in women's response to a low ratio, which begs the question: why would women raise their standards to counter the short-term strategies of men, yet simultaneously have more promiscuous sex? Stone, Shackelford, and Buss had to reconsider their hypothesis. Unfortunately, their data did not inform them of whether women had sex with similar- or higher-value men—just that men and women overall have more uncommitted sex in low-ratio contexts. The fact that women become more promiscuous while also raising their mate standards—Stone, Shackelford, and Buss propose—could reflect the activation of a polygynous mindset.⁷²

In our polygynous past, it may have been adaptive for unmarried women to be more responsive to the advances of higher-value men than it is under a monogamous regime with assortative mating. Promiscuous strategies, directed at high-value targets, could have evolved to attract prosperous polygynists rather than the low-value monogamists whose evolutionary niche had centered on partner exclusivity. Research which shows that low-status women in low-ratio contexts compete for men through early and extrapair pregnancy supports this hypothesis⁷³—although in monogamous regimes, such a strategy is less likely to pay off in terms of pair-bonding. Similar support is offered by Nordic and other Western statistics that report

high singledom and promiscuity in combination with an increasing sexual marginalization of low-value men.⁷⁴ Our current environment of prosperity and individual choice seems to evoke in some women a polygynous mindset, which motivates strategies that—in our monogamous regime—contribute to a cycle of increasing singledom and childlessness.⁷⁵

Sci-Fi Visions for the Future of Mating

So, what can we do with these insights? Theoretically, we could agree on, and implement, new mating practices that align better with male and female mate preferences with regard to facilitating monogamous pair-bonds; that is, if we agree that such bonds are still what benefit most people. Instead of having Tinder distribute the sexiest men for promiscuous mating, we could find ways to connect similar-value men and women, promoting that they spend sufficient time together to see if their pair-bonding attraction systems might activate. This evokes an oft-repeated demand on incel forums: that women should be prohibited from short-term mating with high-value men—or “Chads,” as some incels call them.⁷⁶ Incels have also advocated a redistribution of female sexuality, similar to how governments redistribute economic resources.

I assume very few takers also regarding these means. Different dating dynamics may be a good idea, but who should impose this? If we were willing to submit to a central authority like the medieval Church, there would be much we could do. We understand somewhat well which ideals and practices drive pair-bonding and reproduction, as opposed to promiscuity and low fertility. A Gregorian Reform of the third millennium could transform our MFPs. The challenge, of course, is that three sexual revolutions have made us far too individualistic to submit to a top-down imposition of new MFPs. Most Westerners, I suspect, would rather ride the wave to demographic oblivion than reembrace lifelong monogamy in service of fertility.

A better understanding of the dynamics of modern mating could be beneficial, but mostly for helping individuals adjust their strategies to improve their own pair-bonding prospects. I see little potential for a centrally planned, broad social reform meant to bring fertility rates back above replacement levels. Hungary has tried. They have significantly increased how much they spend on family support, but the effect on fertility has been far from sufficient.⁷⁷ Eastern Europe’s illiberal contestation of reproductive rights has also had limited effect. We could envision a more gradual, bottom-up cultural evolution, but we have no idea of how to steer such processes; humans are terrible at social engineering. The counterforces also appear too strong. The modern ethos—with its mating ideology of confluent love—so compellingly promotes individualism, convenience,

and reward that reproduction increasingly appears like an optional burden rather than the foundational task of all life.

If a central reform, or a nostalgic return to previous practices, are off the table, where might our mating practices be headed? Sci-fi narratives often envision how our descendants will play out their sexuality and reproductive needs, given future technology and ideology. A common assumption is that we continue evolving toward greater individualism. In *Hilal* (1995), Torgrim Eggen makes prostitution more convenient through virtual reality and body suits with sensors and electrodes. He envisions how people will still want a human connection, so the novel's Norwegian men are serviced by Eastern European women who no longer must emigrate to sell sex. Instead of having to relate to low-status prostitutes, customers are offered digital versions of Greta Garbo, Marilyn Monroe, and Queen Cleopatra. This is confluent love on high-tech steroids, as you can have sex "with whom you want, when you want, with no fear of contagion, and not least without post-coital awkwardness."⁷⁸

In *The Information* (*Informasjonen*, 2018), Bår Stenvik lets men and women outsource courting. Instead of having to endear themselves with potential mates, everyone has a digital avatar, "a little Ryan Gosling to play the perfect version of them."⁷⁹ Unfortunately, people still have to date in real life, now with the added pressure of living up to their avatar. The upside is that this generates more revenue for the companies that teach people how to be themselves, after social outsourcing has made them forget. Such dynamics erode the autonomous individual of the modern era. One company's slogan is: "The better we know you, the more we can do for you."⁸⁰ Human shortcomings become viewed as so severe that all outsourcing of tasks that can be performed more effectively by machines is portrayed as inevitable. Reproduction is a harder challenge. The narrator bemoans how modern reason has revealed how bad of a bargain breeding is. We reproduce, hoping to get a return on the investment in our old age, but the costs and risks are too high: "If we were reasonable, we would never do it. It is a paradox: reasonable people do not reproduce."⁸¹

To Dancing Boy (*Til Dancing Boy*, 2022) also engages low fertility.⁸² Sara Johnsen stages how a dictatorial society with stricter morals incentivizes young women to work as surrogates. Individual desires are subordinate to the national fertility rate. A company, Pure Pleasure, undermines the hegemonic ideology through employing technology that provides powerful orgasms. People can buy virtual experiences customized to their sexual preferences and fetishes. After a long period of being impeded, Pure Pleasure wins a "company of the decade" award from the Ethical Council and the Ministry of Health. Their individualistic facilitation of orgasms is seen to promote health and innovation. The novel dramatizes the mating conflicts that arise in the tension between individual and communal needs but does not point to new solutions.

The TV series *Real Humans* (*Äkta människor*, 2012–2014) envisions not how technology can help people get better solo orgasms or compete more effectively for each other's love. It offers AI androids as our new mates. Robots, almost indistinguishable from humans, are portrayed as far better at a variety of mate tasks. As they exclusively focus on the needs and desires of their human partner, androids can free us from having to deal with the self-interests of others. Young, handsome androids with athletic bodies step in where complacent middle-aged husbands do not. They offer full attention, compassionate understanding, and sensual massage. If the husband protests, androids can even resort to heroic violence; they are a woman's best friend.⁸³ They are excellent lovers, partners, and prostitutes.

In *Real Humans*, the protagonist family's teenage son, Tobbe (Kåre Hedebrant), falls in love with their android servant.⁸⁴ This begins as sexual desire, develops into deep infatuation, and ends with a realignment of sexual orientation. Tobbe at first fears that something is wrong with him. To get over his unconventional desire, he tries to woo a human girl, but she rejects his sexual advances. Tobbe's psychologist convinces him that his feelings are normal, as there is no reason for humans to only mate with other humans. Relieved, Tobbe confides to his father that he is "trans-human sexual [which is like] being left or right-handed."⁸⁵ Since their android servant is not programmed to return his love, Tobbe resorts to masturbation, aided by android porn.

None of these four sci-fi works places much faith in future technology's ability to facilitate more functional mating. Better or more practical orgasms, perhaps, but not the type of deep connection that humans actually seek. Our final work does.

In *Vertebrae* (2023), Thure Erik Lund lets AI take over the world. One of the AI's most important societal tasks becomes to facilitate dating and mating. "Since the strongest core-operational in human life supposedly is love," muses the protagonist AI, "it was not least in the love segment with all kinds of related sexual-graphical operating zones we had our first interventions. This worked."⁸⁶ Erotic and romantic interventions are highly profitable and far more efficient than leaving for humans to figure out with whom to mate. From an analytical machine perspective, human mating games play out quite comprehensibly. The AI takes the greatest interest in the societal consequences of people's behavior. In line with the evolutionary perspective on the importance of mating, the narrating AI describes how extraordinary amounts of consequential activity spring from the chaotic ramifications of serial monogamy: "In an eternal porridge of divorces, buying and selling of homes, labor participation, loans, expensive vacations, everything glued together by internet addiction, love is just thrown around between walls, like a soft bouncy ball, unpredictably."⁸⁷

Since love is a secret motor that drives so much human behavior, the AI has no choice but to take charge if it is to optimize human societies.

Mating is not to be deemphasized, but made the most out of. The narrator describes how humans in the era of confluent love had tried to separate sex, love, and desire from what life itself required. They had tried to cut the ties to their own survival instincts, thinking humans could be more than nature. When the Fourth Industrial Revolution granted humans editing access to their own genetic code, “People thought you could remove all the bad outcomes of human desires already in their coding, but sex, desire, and love never go out of fashion.”⁸⁸ When the AI takes over, it reverts modified humans back to their more original state. The fact that the core element of human desire is situated deepest in their libido had made desexualization unworkable, as it removed what made humans human. Once *Homo sapiens* become governed by an all-powerful AI, many of them direct their deepest desire toward merging with the AI, so that they always can be fully connected—a parallel to the merging into a greater whole envisioned by courtly and romantic love.

The Utopias of Dataist Love

Vertebrae exemplifies the aspirations some have for the upcoming sexual revolution. The vision of AI in the Western imagination is often that of an all-powerful, all-knowing entity that we hope will align itself with the well-being of humanity. As it will know us better than we know ourselves, the AI’s benign manipulation should have the potential to greatly enhance our quality of life. There is no lack of more dystopian visions, but the common utopia of AI is that it will ameliorate human weaknesses and create a far better world. As humans experience the superior outcomes of AI decisions, gradually they will stop following the impulses of their own thoughts and emotions, instead ceding authority to the machine.⁸⁹

In terms of master-narratives, Yuval Harari conceptualizes this as a transition from humanism to *dataism*.⁹⁰ We could term the associated mating ideology *dataist love*. Authority in matters of mating would be transferred from individuals to an AI similar to the one in *Vertebrae*. It would match people informed by all their available data. Their expectations would be fine-tuned. Dates could be set up as high-arousal experiences tailored to make the participants fall in love. Unlike humans, we imagine that AI will be really good at social engineering. It could facilitate a mating environment that is adapted to male and female predispositions, as well as to the layers of cultural sediments left by the evolution of mating ideologies that I have investigated in this study.

A bit too rosy? Utopias are supposed to be. That is how they motivate optimism for the future and cooperation around change. It is a hard sell to have people commit to long-term bonds and reproduction. The disenchantment of the modern world has mostly been connected to a loss of gods, but

we have lost much of the magic of mating, too. As Bår Stenvik concluded in *The Information*, “Reasonable people do not reproduce.”⁹¹ Courtly and romantic notions of love were fanciful and exaggerated, but inspired commitment. Such cultural blackmail aligned with the blackmail of our genes; a confluence of impulses compelled people to pair-bond and make babies. Reason alone can offer too weak motivation. Individual choice means that many will abstain. The modern prevalence of premarital sex is another factor, as this has removed a motivation for marriage that was important to many of our ancestors.

These changes cannot be undone. We must build on them. Dataist love will have to find new ways to motivate pair-bonding, perhaps through offering somewhat utopian aspirations. We could imagine creeds of dataist love being less rosy, too. Through the Romantic Century, a plethora of romantic loves were on offer, presented through novels and debated in public. Not all offered starry-eyed utopias. *The Magic Goblet* exemplifies how some novels promoted more pragmatic versions of romantic love. In our era, sci-fi works serve a similar function. Such narratives will continue to investigate how dataist love might manifest itself. Will our descendants still mate with humans, or will androids be so superior that most people will prefer them for partnership, sex, and emotional intimacy? Will we gene-edit our offspring so that future mating markets consist of nothing but high-value men and women? Will we continue to reproduce through copulation? With the Fourth Sexual Revolution, the possibilities seem so boundless that it is challenging not to feel overwhelmed.

Another aspect of emerging technology offers additional hope for our predicament. A demographic collapse threatens our societies most directly through how it ages national populations, leaving far fewer workers to support retirees.⁹² If, in the future, we have widespread AI-driven automation, human labor may no longer be crucial for national economies. If we succeed in developing robots and algorithms that can replace most human workers, low fertility becomes a less direct threat to societal functionality. There are, however, still good reasons for continuing to make humans—especially from our own perspective. I could imagine, if humans are to live in an AI-driven world of abundance, how people who know that their material needs always will be covered, might again want to reproduce in great numbers. Whether our descendants will be motivated to do so—or have the opportunity—the future will show.

This study has traced the evolution of hominin mating across 6 million years, with an emphasis on the past millennium’s Western mating ideologies. A familiarity with this history helps us make sense of the emotions that inform present-day mating. Such knowledge should also inspire pragmatism when looking for solutions. There exists no “natural” state, or ancestral environment, for which human emotions evolved. Even the

first hominins descended from previous species whose mating regimes may have been different. Our lineage never practiced uncomplicated mating. We are not entitled to have mating markets that feel fair or make everyone feel good. We are, however, obliged to reproduce—if we want to continue to matter. As is the case for all species, evolution is a never-ceasing process of adaptation to the challenges of survival and reproduction.

This is no less true today. What has changed is the speed. Early hominins had millions of years to complete the Pair-Bonding Revolution. The Neolithic Revolution took millennia. The First Sexual Revolution lasted centuries. Over the next decades, the Fourth Industrial Revolution will bring humanity’s deepest and quickest transformation yet. Will we again be able to adapt? Perhaps the evolutionary success story of *Homo sapiens* has run its course. Elon Musk fears that biological reproduction could become uncompetitive, so that humanity will end its days as “the biological boot loader for digital superintelligence.”⁹³ Others think that our species could be entering into a golden age.⁹⁴ You have to admit: these are exciting stakes. As we have seen, the hominin lineage can look back at millions of years with remarkably successful adaptations. Such a perspective gives us reason to think that, in yet another radically different environment, these brainy apes, in spite of having divided hearts, should have a fair chance at finding their way.

Notes

- 1 Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.
- 2 Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family*.
- 3 Allan C. Carlson, *The Swedish Experiment in Family Politics: The Myrdals and the Interwar Population Crises* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1990).
- 4 <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/world-population-by-year/>.
- 5 Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*.
- 6 Yuval Noah Harari, *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (London: Harvill Secker, 2016); Nick Bostrom, *Superintelligence: Paths, Dangers, Strategies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Nick Bostrom, “The Vulnerable World Hypothesis,” working paper, University of Oxford, 2018.
- 7 “Max Tegmark: AI and Physics | Lex Fridman Podcast #155,” YouTube, posted by Lex Fridman, January 17, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RL4j4KPwNGM>, 43.
- 8 Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family*.
- 9 Henrich, *The WEIRDest People in the World*; Reddy, *The Making of Romantic Love*.
- 10 We could also view the First, Second, and Third Sexual Revolutions as part of the same drawn-out process, which was triggered by the dissolution of Europe’s kinship societies.
- 11 Apostolou, “Sexual Selection Under Parental Choice in Agropastoral Societies,” 46.
- 12 We do not know when—or if—there will be a Fourth Sexual Revolution. I symbolically place the beginning of this expected transition in 2029, the year

- Ray Kurzweil has pointed to as the inflection point for the Fourth Industrial Revolution; Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).
- 13 For the sake of consistency, I still include the Third Sexual Revolution as a separate revolution.
 - 14 Since I have referred to these as *the West's* sexual revolutions, my typology still makes sense. The two earlier ones were universal.
 - 15 Robin I. M. Dunbar and Susanne Shultz, "Evolution in the Social Brain," *Science* 317.5843 (2007): 1344–7; Mark V. Flinn, David C. Geary, and Carol V. Ward, "Ecological Dominance, Social Competition, and Coevolutionary Arms Races: Why Humans Evolved Extraordinary Intelligence," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 26.1 (2005): 10–46, 14.
 - 16 Our promiscuous and pair-bonding attraction systems are not entirely separate. I simplify to bring attention to how our evolutionary past motivates different mating strategies. Emotions that underpin short- and long-term mating can overlap. For a criticism of Fisher's typology, see Bode, "Romantic Love Evolved by Co-Opting Mother-Infant Bonding." The two attraction systems I refer to as "promiscuous" and "pair-bonding," Bode labels "courtship attraction" and "bonding attraction," although his conceptualization is somewhat different from mine. The typologies of Fisher and Bode are useful for analyzing how relationships evolve. My typology better illuminates how mating opportunities are distributed on short- and long-term markets.
 - 17 Chapais, *Primeval Kinship*; Henrich et al., "The Puzzle of Monogamous Marriage"; Gangestad and Grebe, "Human Mating Systems"; Rosenthal, *Mate Choice*; Schmitt, "Fundamental Strategies of Human Mating."
 - 18 Dunbar and Shultz, "Evolution in the Social Brain"; Flinn et al., "Ecological Dominance."
 - 19 David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021).
 - 20 Gavrilets, "Human Origins."
 - 21 Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); Carroll, *Reading Human Nature*.
 - 22 Yuval Noah Harari, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind* (New York: Random House, 2014). Robert Bellah suggests 60–80,000 years; Bellah, *Religion in Human Evolution*. Richard Dawkins points to 50,000 years; Richard Dawkins and Yan Wong, *The Ancestor's Tale: A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Evolution* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2016). *Homo sapiens'* creative revolution could also have been a more drawn-out affair with older origins.
 - 23 Raffield et al., "Male-Biased Operational Sex Ratios"; Raffield et al., "Polygyny."
 - 24 Jochens, *Women in Old Norse Society*, 17.
 - 25 Baumard et al., "The Cultural Evolution of Love in Literary History."
 - 26 Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, "Cognitive Adaptations for Social Exchange," in Jerome H. Barkow, Leda Cosmides, and John Tooby, eds., *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 163–228.
 - 27 Steven W. Gangestad, Martie G. Haselton, and David M. Buss, "TARGET ARTICLE: Evolutionary Foundations of Cultural Variation: Evoked Culture and Mate Preferences," *Psychological Inquiry* 17.2 (2006): 75–95.
 - 28 Emily A. Stone, Todd K. Shackelford, and David M. Buss, "Sex Ratio and Mate Preferences: A Cross-Cultural Investigation," *European Journal of Social Psychology* 37.2 (2007): 288–96.

- 29 Baumard et al., “The Cultural Evolution of Love in Literary History.”
- 30 Erickson, “The Marital Economy in Comparative Perspective”; Johansen, “Marriage or Money?”; Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family*; Secombe, *A Millennium of Family Change*; Bandler, *Strategies of Passion*.
- 31 Another detriment to the night courting tradition was mobile labor. In Sweden, promiscuous loggers, who were not part of the local community, could more easily sneak away if a girl became pregnant; Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family*.
- 32 Men also desire higher-value mates, but not to the extent that women do. Men’s promiscuous attraction system is far less discriminatory. This sex difference in mate preferences facilitates that women have generous access to higher-value men on short-term markets.
- 33 Bereczkei et al., “Resources, Attractiveness, Family Commitment”; Buss and Schmitt, “Evolutionary Psychology and Feminism.”
- 34 Clark and Hatfield, “Gender Differences in Receptivity to Sexual Offers”; Buss and Schmitt, “Sexual Strategies Theory.”
- 35 Robert L. Smith, “Human Sperm Competition,” in Robert L. Smith, ed., *Sperm Competition and the Evolution of Animal Mating Systems* (London: Academic Press, 1984), 601–60, 602.
- 36 Baumeister, *Is There Anything Good about Men?*
- 37 Apostolou’s work on parental choice in the evolution of human mating attests to how some female mate preferences were deemphasized in mate selection. Regarding a potential mate’s resources and status, female and parental preferences were quite aligned; Apostolou, *Sexual Selection in Homo sapiens*.
- 38 Paraphrased in Buss, *The Evolution of Desire*.
- 39 Sundström, *För Lydia*, 82.
- 40 Brooks et al., “Effects of Gender Inequality.”
- 41 Carlson, *The Swedish Experiment in Family Politics*.
- 42 Statistics Norway, “Økonomisk utsyn over året 2021,” in *Økonomiske Analyser* 1, 2022. National oil revenue is also counted as tax.
- 43 Our World in Data, 2019, <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/one-person-households>.
- 44 Buss, *The Evolution of Desire*.
- 45 OECD Data, “Fertility Rates.”
- 46 Almås et al., “The Economics of Hypergamy.”
- 47 Amundsen, “En av fire menn får ikke barn.” Three times as many men as women report to suffer involuntary childlessness; Håkonsen and Krekling, “Dramatisk økning i andelen barnløse.”
- 48 Berglöff, “Det nye singelnorge.”
- 49 William Costello et al., “The Mating Crisis and Its Consequences,” presentation at Northeastern Evolutionary Psychology Conference 2024.
- 50 BRC, “What Percentage.” My most recent statistics on sexual inactivity are from the United States, not Scandinavia.
- 51 Mellor, *Romanticism & Gender*, 28.
- 52 In an article, I made an evolutionary case for why polygyny might be the least culturally appalling means most likely to increase Western fertility; Larsen, “An Evolutionary Case for Polygyny to Counter Demographic Collapse.”
- 53 An early response to low fertility was to promote increased immigration; Grant et al., “Trends in European Fertility”; Julien Grunfelder et al., eds., *State of the Nordic Region 2020* (Copenhagen: Nordic Council of Ministers, 2020); Vollset et al., “Fertility.” Since many developing countries still have

- high fertility rates, transferring parts of their population to developed nations appeared as a viable solution. From 2000 to 2015, Norway's immigrant population tripled, yet the fertility rate kept falling. Today, 15% of residents are immigrants, which increases the population, but without motivating reproduction near replacement levels. A cultural change across Europe after the 2015 migrant crisis has made continued large-scale immigration a less compelling proposition. Recent long-term-cost estimates have shown that instead of improving national finances, many groups of immigrants undermine the future viability of Western welfare states; NOU 2017:2, *Integrasjon og tillit: Langsiktige konsekvenser av høy innvandring* (Departementets sikkerhets-og serviceorganisasjon. Informasjonsforvaltning). Eastern European and Asian cultures have been less willing to open their borders to counter low fertility; Vollset et al., "Fertility."
- 54 Regarding the actual selling of sex, Scandinavian practices vary. In 1999, Sweden pioneered the so-called Nordic Model of Prostitution Law. People can sell sex, but customers are criminalized. Norway prosecutes citizens who buy sex anywhere in the world. Danes have legal prostitution.
- 55 Harper et al., "Changes in the Distribution of Sex Partners."
- 56 Bilton, "Tinder, the Fast-Growing Dating App, Taps an Age-Old Truth"; Gerrard, "Why Do Women Have the Upper Hand on Tinder?"
- 57 Cited from Buss, *The Evolution of Desire*.
- 58 Leigland, "Dating i 2021: Hjertesukk fra singel kvinne (32)."
- 59 Buss, "Sexual Conflict in Human Mating."
- 60 Stone et al., "Sex Ratio and Mate Preferences."
- 61 For a more elaborate account of sex ratio theory, see Mads Larsen, "Mate Preference: Sex Ratio Effects," Todd Shackelford, ed., *Encyclopedia of Sexual Psychology and Behavior* (London: Springer Nature, 2023), 1–8.
- 62 Among the factors that can skew the sex ratio are war, violence, emigration, urbanization, selective infanticide, and gender overmortality.
- 63 Adkins et al., "Student Bodies."
- 64 David Schmitt, "Sociosexuality from Argentina to Zimbabwe: A 48-nation Study of Sex, Culture, and Strategies of Human Mating," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 28.2 (2005): 247–75.
- 65 Stone et al., "Sex Ratio and Mate Preferences."
- 66 Schmitt, "Sociosexuality from Argentina to Zimbabwe."
- 67 Nigel Barber, "Women's Dress Fashions as a Function of Reproductive Strategy," *Sex Roles* 40 (1999): 459–71.
- 68 Monique Borgerhoff Mulder, "Economic Inequality Drives Female Sexualization," *PNAS* 115.35 (2018): 8658–60.
- 69 Daniel T. Lichter, Robert N. Anderson, and Mark D. Hayward, "Marriage Markets and Marital Choice," *Journal of Family Issues* 16.4 (1995): 412–31.
- 70 Andreas Filser and Richard Preetz, "Do Local Sex Ratios Approximate Subjective Partner Markets? Evidence from the German Family Panel," *Human Nature* 32 (2021): 406–33; Amanda C. Hahn et al., "Sex Ratio Influences the Motivational Salience of Facial Attractiveness," *Biology Letters* 10.6 (2014): 20140148.
- 71 Yong et al., "When Social Status Gets in The Way of Reproduction in Modern Settings."
- 72 Stone et al., "Sex Ratio and Mate Preferences."
- 73 Nigel Barber, "On the Relationship between Country Sex Ratios and Teen Pregnancy Rates: A Replication," *Cross-Cultural Research* 34.1 (2000): 26–37;

- Chipman and Morrison, “The Impact of Sex Ratio and Economic Status on Local Birth Rates.”
- 74 Almás et al., “The Economics of Hypergamy”; Ueda et al., “Trends in Frequency.”
- 75 Larsen, “An Evolutionary Case for Polygyny to Counter Demographic Collapse.”
- 76 See note 54 in Chapter 10.
- 77 Éva Berde and Áron Drabancz, “The Propensity to Have Children in Hungary, with Some Examples from Other European Countries,” *Frontiers in Sociology* 7 (2022): 1009115.
- 78 Torgrim Eggen, *Hilal* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1995), 205–6.
- 79 Bår Stenvik, *Informasjonen* (Oslo: Tiden, 2018), 86.
- 80 Stenvik, *Informasjonen*, 114.
- 81 Stenvik, *Informasjonen*, 282.
- 82 Sara Johnsen, *Til Dancing Boy* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 2022).
- 83 *Real Humans* has a gender slant on its portrayal of human–android relationships. When men are attracted to female androids, this is predominantly portrayed as oppressive or pathetic. Women’s relationships to male androids lead mostly to positive outcomes. I do not interpret the series’ creator to argue that men are less suited for mating with machines. I think viewers are meant to question the obvious—and very Swedish—gender bias.
- 84 David Levy predicts that humans will fall in love with robots by 2050; David Levy, *Love + Sex with Robots: The Evolution of Human-Robot Relations* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).
- 85 *Real Humans* [Åkta människor], Lars Lundström, creator (Sveriges Television, 2012–14), season 1, episode 9, minutes 36–7.
- 86 Thure Erik Lund, *Vertebrae* (Oslo: Aschehoug, 2023), 242.
- 87 Lund, *Vertebrae*, 243.
- 88 Lund, *Vertebrae*, 170.
- 89 Harari, *Homo Deus*; Bostrom, *Superintelligence*.
- 90 Yuval Noah Harari, “Dataism is Our New God,” *New Perspectives Quarterly* 34.2 (2017): 36–43.
- 91 Stenvik, *Informasjonen*, 282.
- 92 There would be additional negative externalities from a demographic collapse. For instance, strong nations will be incentivized to consolidate power as their populations dwindle. Peter Zeihan argues that Russia’s demographic decline was a main driver behind their 2022 attack on Ukraine; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UA-jOLF2T4c>. Nicholas Eberstadt points to how economic decline is likely to change cultural psychology, motivating despondency, conflict, and antidemocratic attitudes; Eberstadt, “Can America Cope with Demographic Decline?”
- 93 Ricki Harris, “Elon Musk: Humanity Is a Kind of ‘Biological Boot Loader’ for AI,” *Wired*, September 1, 2019, <https://www.wired.com/story/elon-musk-humanity-biological-boot-loader-ai/>.
- 94 John Danaher, “Techno-Optimism: An Analysis, An Evaluation and a Modest Defence,” *Philosophy & Technology* 35 (2022): 54.

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