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“The Battle Against Sameness”:

Queer Marriages in Forster and Woolf

In E. M. Forster’s novel *Howards End*, one of the most significant passages of the work occurs in the last few pages, spoken by Margaret to her sister Helen. Helen describes her feeling that “nothing seems to match” after the events of the novel, and Margaret’s response surmises one of the novel’s central ideas:

Margaret silenced her. She said: “It is only that people are far more different than is pretended. All over the world men and women are worrying because they cannot develop as they are supposed to develop.... Don't fret yourself, Helen. Develop what you have....Others – others go further still, and move outside humanity altogether....Don't you see that all this leads to comfort in the end? It is part of the battle against sameness. Differences – eternal differences, planted by God in a single family, so that there may always be colour; sorrow perhaps, but colour in the daily gray” (*Howards* 266-7).

With these lines, Margaret rejects the ideas of conformity that were so rampant during the Victorian era. Both Helen and Margaret have unconventional lifestyles that mark them as different from traditional concepts of marriage and family. The directness of this passage can be seen as reflective of Forster’s own life, as he often rejected the conventions widely enforced by society. Forster, Woolf, and other members of the Bloomsbury Group embraced many similar nontraditional ideas in regards to both their own personal relationships, and the relationships that they depicted in their work. Perhaps the best fleshed-out examples of this from their novels

include Clarissa and Richard from *Mrs. Dalloway*, Margaret and Henry from *Howards End*, and Maurice and Alec from *Maurice*. This paper will examine these three relationships from Woolf and Forster's works with the purpose of understanding how and why these 'marriages' subvert convention, and thus present an alternative third option to marriage that exists apart from traditional society.

In order to give a full analysis of these fictional relationships, it is necessary to consider the concepts of marriage and tradition that existed in the Bloomsbury Group. In his 'Preface to a Literary History of Bloomsbury,' S. P. Rosenbaum describes the Bloomsbury Group to be, at its core, "a collectivity of friends who knew and loved each other in different ways" (Rosenbaum 332). This description seems almost inadequate to truly convey the complex intertwining of relationships that existed within the group. Many members married each other, and also had relationships within the group outside of their marriages. A large number of these fall into the category of queer relationships as defined by Benjamin Bateman, who wrote, "I call these queer because they undermine the social norms against which certain kinds of erotic and nonerotic intimacy—same-sex, cross-class, and intergenerational, to name only a few—are judged to be abnormal, inferior, insane" (Bateman). This broader definition allows for numerous Bloomsbury relationships to be read as queer, from Woolf's same-sex affair with Vita Sackeville-West, to Angelica and David Garnett's marriage with a 25-year age difference, to Vanessa Bell's numerous affairs, one of which resulted in Angelica's birth out of wedlock. Being surrounded with these, and other, queer relationships allowed the Group members to think about marriage, love, sexuality, and gender in new ways that blatantly questioned and rejected Victorian ideals.

In Woolf's account of the Bloomsbury Group, she describes how "sex permeated our conversation. The word bugger was never far from our lips. We discussed copulation with the

same excitement and openness that we had discussed the nature of good” (*Moments* 196). This atmosphere was unique to the Bloomsbury Group at the time, and it allowed Forster, as a homosexual man, to write about his own experiences with queer relationships and share his writing with his friends. This of course includes the same-sex relationships depicted in *Maurice*, but also the other relationships in Forster’s novels which are queer according to Bateman’s definition, in that they move outside of the societal norms of that period. Further, Jane Goldman presents that indications of queerness can be found in the “textual strategies of irony, parody, and allusion, used by Woolf and Forster in their revolutionary work”. These strategies, along with the queerness present in the overlying themes and characters, indicate that Woolf and Forster’s real lives and ideas filtered heavily into their fictional constructions of relationships.

Forster’s relationship between Maurice and Alec is possibly the most noticeably unconventional of the three relationships to be examined in this paper. This is not only due to the fact that this relationship was homosexual, although that plays a large role. Indeed, the subject matter of the novel prevented its publication until nearly 60 years after it had been written, and it still faced extremely varied and sometimes harsh criticism in the years following its publication. In his analysis of *Maurice*, Matthew Curr attributes this to “the radical intrusion of the personal and autobiographical that unsettle the perceived reception of a “good” literary work” (Curr 59). The influence of Forster’s own life and his ideas of what could constitute a queer, alternative marriage are highly evident throughout the novel. One such influenced aspect is the class difference between Maurice and Alec. Maurice is a stockbroker who attended Cambridge, while Alec is a gamekeeper who works for Maurice’s previous partner. Perhaps the most significant and enduring relationship in Forster’s own life was with a policeman, while he himself was a writer living off of his inheritance. This does not necessarily make this aspect of the relationship

strictly autobiographical, especially because Forster's relationship had not yet occurred when he was writing *Maurice*. However, the choice to include this in Maurice and Alec's relationship indicates it to be a genuine depiction of a queer relationship.

Another signifier that this is a queer relationship, according to Bateman's definition of unconventionality and judgement, is specifically established by Forster within the novel. Maurice's same-sex relationship prior to Alec had been chaste and mainly emotional, with the couple sharing a few kisses but nothing else physically. Forster draws attention to how Maurice's relationship with Alec is different:

"I have shared with Alec," [Maurice] said after deep thought.

"Shared what?"

"All I have. Which includes my body."

Clive sprang up with a whimper of disgust (*Maurice* 243).

At the time when Forster was writing, physical intimacy between two men was a criminal offence in England (*Offenses*). Even for Clive, who had a romantic same-sex relationship, the concept of moving beyond that into outright sexual activity is blatantly revolting. Throughout the novel, numerous characters seem to be somewhat accepting of what they perceive to be passionate homosocial relationships. It is the physical act, or consummation of the relationship, that is rejected even by scholars when the dean of the college instructs a lecturer to "omit: a reference to the unspeakable vice of the Greeks" (*Maurice* 51). By emphasizing this aspect of Maurice and Alec's relationship, Forster forces the reader to confront a topic that was largely avoided in his time, and clearly marks this couple as queer through their rejection of what would be acceptable in their relationship.

The culmination of this relationship is the two characters' emotional journeys and their devotion to one another. Near the final chapter of the novel, the narrator describes Maurice's internal monologue about the couple's future: "He was bound for his new home... He knew what the call was, and what his answer must be. They must live outside class, without relations or money; they must work and stick together till death" (*Maurice* 238-9). Forster's particular choice of language in this quote establishes the couple's rejection of norms as a necessity, but also as a positive ending: they can find a 'home', a different kind of 'comfort in the end'. Curr reads Maurice and Alec's relationship as "a true, loving marriage," and rightly so (Curr 64). Compared to the other relationships depicted in the novel, both heterosexual and homosexual, Maurice and Alec display the best connection to, and understanding of, each other. The final line even evokes the language of traditional wedding vows, with a clearly worded commitment to a lifelong relationship which can only be ended with death. Further, Forster's description of living "outside" clarifies this marriage as queer because its participants are choosing to remove themselves from society, both physically and in terms of their ideals.

By comparison, it is somewhat less obvious that Clarissa and Richard from Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* also have a queer marriage in numerous ways. Conducting such a reading relies on the examination of specific textual evidence that defines their relationship. A major non-traditional aspect is what Woolf often described as 'a room of one's own'— Clarissa does not sleep in the same bed or room as Richard, rather, she has her own room and bed in the attic. This immediately marks them as an unusual married couple, although this queerness differs from that of Maurice and Alec's because it exists entirely within the relationship, rather than in the public eye. This fact, however, does not decrease the significance of Clarissa's solitary room. This space allows for Clarissa to have independent thought and identity that are unattached to her

marriage, and her status in her relationship with Richard. She retreats from the rest of the house, and her traditionally familial life, “like a nun withdrawing” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 31). Her repeated imagery of herself as a virgin and nun rejects the other roles that she is widely known to fill in her marriage as a wife and mother. Clarissa also goes into the room and promptly removes her outer jacket and hat, reminiscent of removing an outer, public layer of oneself. Alone in her attic room, she is able to be more genuine and act less out of a desire to fill certain roles. Here, she reflects on memories, past relationships, and reads books that Richard does not necessarily approve of. This individuality and emphasis on being alone is not expected in traditional Victorian ideas of marriage, especially not for a woman.

Another scene that is significant for this reading is Richard’s narration of his feelings towards Clarissa, and especially how he expresses them. Richard buys flowers to bring to Clarissa and repeatedly determines that he will “tell his wife he loved her. He would say it in so many words, when he came into the room. For it is a thousand pities never to say what one feels, he thought” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 116). Despite his clearly established intentions, Richard is unable to follow through with his goals when he sees Clarissa only two pages later: “(He could not bring himself to say he loved her; not in so many words.) But how lovely, she said, taking his flowers. She understood, she understood without his speaking; his Clarissa” (*Mrs. Dalloway* 118). This small aspect is inarguably significant in reading Clarissa and Richard’s relationship, both because of the complexity assigned to a traditional romantic gesture, and the sense of understanding that Richard conveys. In an analysis of this novel, Jesse Wolfe reads this scene as distinctly queer, pointing to Richard’s inability to speak his affections as equivalent to Oscar Wilde’s ‘love that dare not speak its name’ (Wolfe). Woolf’s use of interiority subverts traditional expectations about the relationship between a husband and wife, marking this as queer. Therefore, the

understanding that Richard feels from Clarissa is comparable to Maurice's reflections on his and Alec's relationship

The last significant marker of queerness in the Dalloway's relationship is the issue of desire between Richard and Clarissa. Clarissa's desires throughout the book are polygamous, and both homo- and heterosexual. She describes her relationship with Sally by saying that she has "undoubtedly felt what men felt... had not that, after all, been love?" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 32). She also states that she could have married Peter, and indeed still wonders if she should have. Yet this is not because she has a dislike of Richard, it is in spite of the relationship and life that they have together. On Richard's part, he is the one who suggests that Clarissa have her separate room in the attic in the first place. Yet, it is made clear that he does not lack love for her, which implies that the expected desire of a married couple and the physical sharing of a bed is just not necessary to Richard in this relationship. Ironically, Richard's lack of physical desire is queer for the same reason that Maurice's presence of desire is queer: they are both outside of what is expected for heterosexual and homosexual relationships, respectively. Therefore, the Dalloway's relationship also queers the expectation that marriage and desire can, or should, only be heterosexual, monogamous, or that it should even be sexual at all.

The final of the three relationships is again different in several ways, primarily that these major indicators of a queer, nontraditional relationship are ideological and moral, as opposed to the unconventional aspects of communication and desire between Richard and Clarissa. In *Howard's End*, Forster constructs numerous binaries, especially between the members of the Wilcox family and the Schlegel family. When Helen recounts her time living with the Wilcoxes, the differences in the two families' political and moral ideas seem irreconcilable without one family utterly conceding to the other. The same is true when it comes to the financial statuses of

the Wilcoxes and the Schlegels. This is one thing, noted in the novel itself, which makes Margaret and Henry's marriage strange to those who know them, especially their family members. The Schlegels live off their inheritance, which is enough that Tibby can choose to not work, and Helen and Margaret do not need to get married if they do not want to do so. Quite by contrast, Henry has worked for his whole life, and seems to be proud that his sons will also have their own careers and fortunes. The age difference between Margaret and Henry functions in a similar sense. It is, perhaps, not completely unheard of in a marriage at the time it was written, however, it is sufficiently queer enough to raise questions from family and friends about the unusualness of the relationship. Charles Campbell looks at these, and other, differences in their relationship and describes that "Margaret's marriage is a learning process", which he sees as "radical"(Campbell 111). Forster puts multiple contrasting binaries in close conversation with each other, which means this relationship will never have the dynamic of a traditional Victorian marriage. These aspects are also external in that they are easy for other people to notice and comment upon, thus making the relationship queer from outsiders' perceptions.

In terms of the internal aspects of the relationship, the communication between Henry and Margaret is often unconventional. There are multiple scenes where this seems to be caused by a base difference in their ideas, morals, or opinions. In one conversation before Henry and Margaret are together, there are multiple points of disagreement and Henry frequently interrupts, "as it were, thrusting his hand into her speech" (*Howard's* 122). It reaches the point where Margaret finds that she "could not reply. Was [Henry] incredibly stupid, or did he understand her better than she understood herself?" (*Howard's* 122). Then in a later scene, Margaret berrates Henry: "I've had enough of your unweeded kindness. I've spoilt you long enough... No one has ever told you what you are—muddled, criminally muddled. Men like you use repentance as a

bind, so don't repent" (*Howard's* 243). These and other scenes feel more like battles than conversations because of the language and delivery of the lines. Due to the contrary aspects, these scenes mark Henry and Margaret's relationship as queer because of the deviation from the Victorian expectations of communication in a marriage, which relied heavily on gender. Women could be expected to be submissive to their husbands in all ways, including yielding to their perspectives and political ideas. Therefore, Margaret stands out because she frequently challenges Henry's opinions and debates with him, even before they were married. Henry himself is also unconventional because he often participates in these exchanges, and seems to appreciate Margaret's non-complacency because he marries her. Margaret's outspokenness about her own opinions makes her deviation from these norms more apparent, but this alone could indicate feminist ideas instead of Bateman's definition of queerness. It is only with a more complete reading that includes Henry's role in the relationship as well that marks the relationship and both characters' dynamics with each other as queer.

Possibly what most effectively cements Henry and Margaret's relationship as queer is the novel's conclusion. Similar to Maurice and Alec, the novel ends with Henry and Margaret effectively removed from society. In his analysis of this theme, David Medalie points to the significance of the realization that "to be 'embedded in society' is only advantageous for those who are placed to profit from 'connection.' For those who ... 'move outside humanity,' society is a 'prison house'" (Medalie). The literal, physical removal of the characters from society represents their more theoretical rejection of societal judgement and norms. In addition to this, the family which resides in Howards End consists of Margaret, Henry, Helen, and Helen's illegitimate child. This subverts the concept of a nuclear family, and makes it more apparent that Helen has a child but no husband, and Margaret and Henry have no children. Finally, in this

conclusion the praise for bringing the family together is directed towards Margaret, not Henry. Helen describes their current life to Margaret as “A change—and all through you!... Can’t it strike you—even for a moment—that your life has been heroic?” (*Howard’s* 267-8). The language of these sentences makes it clear that Margaret is the one who has taken decisive action in the relationship, and is therefore the leader. Forster ends the novel with the power of the marriage shifted to the feminine and matriarchal character, while Henry has become more submissive to Margaret’s opinions in a distinctly queer and nontraditional manner.

Reading Henry and Margaret, Clarissa and Richard, and Maurice and Alec with Bateman’s theory serves multiple purposes. It is an opportunity to explore a new intertextuality amongst the Bloomsbury Group’s writings and their ideas. This is more essential in order to understand Forster and Woolf’s works than it would be for the works of many other authors, since the sharing of ideas, media, and creative works was a fundamental function of the Group. This reading also invites new questions to further the conversation, both in regards to other marriages in Bloomsbury writing as well as related topics including gender, power, and the public/private divide as depicted by Woolf and Forster.

Bateman’s broad definition of queer is necessary to truly understand the different directions which Forster and Woolf approached marriage from. None of these aspects are truly separate from the others, rather, they make up an intersectional dialogue to address the question of what a marriage should be, as well as what it can be. Not only are these three marriages different from Victorian societal norms, they are also all different from each other. However, they are all united through these variations of queerness. Via Margaret, Forster expresses the infinite amount of difference that exists, and goes even further to frame these “eternal differences” as something positive (*Howard’s* 267). Through their novels, Woolf and Forster assert not only the

importance of difference from norms, but also that there is no single way to be different. Their own lived experiences with queer marriages gave them the unique perspective necessary to challenge the traditional expectations of marriage, and thus usher in new conventions of literature that depart from the uniformity of Victorian marriage plots.

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