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**‘Can Adultery Save Your Marriage?’: an
Exploration of British Women’s Magazines’
Discourses about Women Engaging in Extra-
Marital Relationships in the 1970s**

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Introduction

*'To some people the idea of being unfaithful is outrageous, unthinkable: some see it as a forgivable weakness, while others will consider it a necessary diversion that improves the main relationship.'*¹

This was the opening phrase in Patricia Geaney's article on female infidelity which was published in the teenage women's magazine *Petticoat* in 1973. While Geaney concluded that fidelity was a crucial component of a healthy and long-lasting relationship,² her opening quote suggests that her opinion was not the only one circulating about this topic at the time. Indeed, debates about the ethics and morality of adulterous relationships pervaded women's magazines across the 1970s, with writers dedicating particular attention to women's involvement in these affairs.

These authors were writing in a decade when, in theory at least, there was a historically unprecedented low risk level attached to having an extra-marital relationship for women. The 1969 Divorce Reform Act removed the concept of 'matrimonial offences' and instead allowed couples to divorce on the grounds of 'irretrievable breakdown' in their marriages. This ensured that a woman (or a man) who committed adultery was no longer automatically dubbed the 'guilty party' in divorce cases and punished in the courts of law.³ Furthermore, the 1967 Abortion Act and the 1967 Family Planning Act provided easier access to abortion services and hormonal contraception, allowing women to manage the reproductive consequences of sexual intercourse (including extra-marital sex) more effectively.⁴

This dissertation will use women's magazines to conduct a detailed investigation into conceptualisations of female extra-marital relationships in Britain in the 1970s. Included in its definition of 'female extra-marital relationships' are both married women being unfaithful to their husbands and single women having affairs with married men. By studying the cultural portrayal of these phenomena, this dissertation seeks to explore contemporary attitudes towards adultery and, more broadly, marriage and appropriate female conduct within them. It will argue that mainstream British women's magazines had no uniform discourse on female extra-marital relationships in the 1970s. Writers were influenced by different ideologies and as such had varying moral stances on adultery. However, a strong motivation to preserve existing marriages underpinned all these discourses, with

¹ Patricia Geaney, 'Forsaking All Others[...]', *Petticoat*, 11 August 1973, pp. 6-7 (p. 6).

² *Ibid.*, p. 7.

³ Marita Carnelley, 'Laws on Adultery: Comparing the Historical Development of South African Common-Law Principles with Those in English Law', *Fundamina*, 19 (2013), 185-211 (p. 210).

⁴ Stephen Brooke, *Sexual Politics: Sexuality, Family Planning, and the British Left from the 1880s to the Present Day* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 172-75.

writers emphasising that women should never engage in behaviours that would threaten marital relationships.

Literature:

Historians have largely overlooked the history of extra-marital relationships in the 1970s. In part, this is due to a broader oversight within the historiography, with Alana Harris and Timothy Jones acknowledging historians' tendencies to overlook 'the secret, sometimes darker, but equally important aspects of modern love'.⁵ However, even as academics have increasingly researched the history of adultery, the 1970s have been neglected as a period of consideration.⁶ A notable exception was Martin Richards and Jane Elliott's 1991 chapter titled 'Sex and Marriage in the 1960s and 1970s' which included a short section on extra-marital sex.⁷ Methodological issues undermine the utility of their work. One of the main benefits of working with women's magazines is that they are composed of a multiplicity of voices, exposing scholars to a diverse array of perspectives.⁸ Elliott and Richards failed to unlock this potential, only analysing the writings of agony aunts. As the first chapter of this dissertation will show, these figures were some of the most conservative voices in women's magazines and cannot be considered representative of all views towards adultery. Furthermore, Elliott and Richards were intent on establishing British society as either pro-adultery or anti-adultery and failed to consider the possibility that no such consensus existed. These shortcomings meant that they overlooked the variety of opinions about adultery in Britain in the 1970s. This dissertation will overcome these weaknesses by considering the full spectrum of voices within women's magazines. Focusing exclusively on female extra-marital relationships will allow it enough space to fully unpack the competing strands of discourse circulating about this topic. In doing so, it will reveal the hitherto unrecognised complexity of societal attitudes towards infidelity in the 1970s, making a meaningful and necessary contribution to the existing literature.

In carrying out this study, this dissertation will deepen understandings of the history of marriage in Britain in the 1970s. Historians have ascribed great significance to the social climate of

⁵ Alana Harris, and Timothy Jones, 'Introduction', in *Love and Romance in Britain, 1918–1970*, ed. by Alana Harris and Timothy Jones (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 1–19 (p. 14).

⁶ These works, for example, both end their analysis in 1969: Claire Langhamer, 'Adultery in Post-War England', *History Workshop Journal*, 62 (2006), 86–115 (p.110); Tanya Evans, 'The Other Woman and Her Child: Extra-Marital Affairs and Illegitimacy in Twentieth-Century Britain', *Women's History Review*, 20 (2011), 47–65 (p. 47).

⁷ Jane Elliott, and Martin Richards, 'Sex and Marriage in the 1960s and 1970s', in *Marriage, Domestic Life, and Social Change: Writings for Jacqueline Burgoyne, 1944–88*, ed. by David Clark (London: Routledge, 1991), pp. 33–54 (pp. 42–44).

⁸ Penny Tinkler, 'Fragmentation and Inclusivity: Methods for Working with Girls' and Women's Magazines', in *Women in Magazines: Research, Representation, Production and Consumption*, ed. by Rachel Ritchie et al. (New York: Routledge, 2016), pp. 25–39 (p. 31).

the decade in irreparably damaging people's faith in the ideal of the 'companionate marriage' (a marriage based on emotional and sexual fulfilment and compatibility as opposed to economic necessity). Key proponents of this view were Marcus Collins and Clare Langhamer. They identified a series of factors to explain this declining reputation, including rising female participation in the workforce, feminist critiques of marriage as oppressive, and the 1969 Divorce Reform Act.⁹ Historians who viewed marriage from the perspective of the 'sexual revolution' reiterated these findings. Carol Dyhouse and Hera Cook, for example, argued that the greater availability of contraception was significant in empowering women to reject marriage and distance themselves from their previous domestic identities.¹⁰ Though some of these works briefly referred to extra-marital relationships in earlier periods, their conclusions about marriage in the 1970s did not include a consideration of this topic. This omission is significant, especially as academics such as Hannah Charnock, who conducted a study into women's magazines' discussions about infidelity in the 1930s, have increasingly demonstrated the potential for such studies to complicate dominant narratives about the history of marriage in modern Britain.¹¹ This dissertation seeks to redress this oversight, assessing the cultural significance of marriage in British society through the lens of discourses about women who overstepped, or stepped into, the parameters of marital contracts. It will illustrate how these discourses encouraged women to navigate the changing social, economic, and legal contexts with marriage preservation at the forefront of their minds at all times. This fervour to defend marriages suggests, as a minority of scholars have done,¹² that there was still significant cultural value attached to this relationship model in the 1970s.

This dissertation contributes to a broader revisionist trend in the historiography. The 1970s have been popularly perceived as a decade of social, political, and economic upheaval and discontent.¹³ Historians have used dominant understandings of marriage in the 1970s to feed into these metanarratives of the decade – Brian Harrison's work is a good example of this.¹⁴ Recently, however,

⁹ Marcus Collins, *Modern Love: An Intimate History of Men and Women in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London: Atlantic, 2004), pp. 134-205; Claire Langhamer, *The English in Love: The Intimate Story of an Emotional Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 210.

¹⁰ Hera Cook, *The Long Sexual Revolution: English Women, Sex, and Contraception 1800-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 318; Carol Dyhouse, *Love Lives: From Cinderella to Frozen* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 7-8.

¹¹ Hannah Charnock, 'A Million Little Bonds': Infidelity, Divorce and the Emotional Worlds of Marriage in British Women's Magazines of the 1930s', *Cultural and Social History*, 14 (2017), 363-79 (p. 367).

¹² John Gillis, *For Better, for Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 310; Arthur Marwick, *British Society since 1945*. 4th edn (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 210.

¹³ Some examples of these narratives: David Marquand, *Britain since 1918: The Strange Career of British Democracy* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2008), pp. 266-74; Andrew Marr, *A History of Modern Britain*. 10th anniversary edn (London: Pan Books, 2017), pp. 229-378.

¹⁴ Brian Harrison, *Finding a Role: The United Kingdom, 1970-1990* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 224.

historians have begun to revise these turmoil-ridden narratives of the decade and argued that there were greater levels of stability and harmony than have previously been suggested.¹⁵ In demonstrating that marriage remained a deeply valued institution within British society, this dissertation will add further evidence to support these revisionist accounts.

Methodology:

This dissertation will use women's magazines to shed light upon this neglected historical realm. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the fragmentation of the women's magazine market as publishers targeted a growing number of distinct segments of the female population.¹⁶ The array of publications consulted in this dissertation provides a representative picture of the women's magazine market in this decade. The following chapters will consider two weekly magazines whose intended audience was a domestic one: *Woman* and *Woman's Own*.¹⁷ Content within these publications was obtained through archival research carried out at the British Library. It will also examine the magazines *Cosmopolitan* and *She* which were aimed at employed, single, and sexually active women.¹⁸ The final category of magazines it will look at were teenage magazines aimed at female audiences aged between 15 and 24, notably *19* and *Petticoat*.¹⁹ The archives for these publications have all been digitised. Between them, these magazines reached huge portions of the female population in Britain. *Woman* and *Woman's Own* were the clear market leaders, with circulations lingering at around 1.5 million across the decade. The other magazines were also very popular, ranging from *Cosmopolitan's* monthly circulation of around 440,000 to *19's* of approximately 170,000.²⁰ Writers in these publications, though not in agreement about the morality of female extra-marital relationships, were united in their motivation to prevent affairs from being the cause of marital breakdowns. Several academics have stressed the importance of women's magazines as cultural influences which helped shape feminine identities and socialise women to specific sexual and emotional cultures, especially during the 'sexual revolution'.²¹ The cultural significance of these publications combined with their large and diverse female audience

¹⁵ Some revisionist works: Lawrence Black, and Hugh Pemberton, 'Introduction', in *Reassessing 1970s Britain*, ed. by Lawrence Black, Hugh Pemberton and Pat Thane (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 1-15 (p. 2); Alwyn Turner, *Crisis? What Crisis?: Britain in the 1970s*. 2nd edn (London: Aurum, 2013), p. 275.

¹⁶ Deborah Chambers, 'Contexts and Developments in Women's Magazines', in *The Routledge Companion to British Media History*, ed. by Martin Conboy and John Steel (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), pp. 285-96 (p. 289).

¹⁷ Anna Gough-Yates, *Understanding Women's Magazines: Publishing, Markets and Readerships* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 2-4.

¹⁸ Ros Ballaster and others, *Women's Worlds: Ideology, Femininity and the Woman's Magazine* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 112.

¹⁹ Penny Tinkler, 'Are You Really Living?' If Not, 'Get with It!': The Teenage Self and Lifestyle in Young Women's Magazines, Britain 1957-70', *Cultural and Social History*, 11 (2015), 597-619 (p. 599).

²⁰ Janice Winship, *Inside Women's Magazines* (London: Pandora, 1987), p. 166.

²¹ Marjorie Ferguson, *Forever Feminine: Women's Magazines and the Cult of Femininity* (London: Heinemann, 1983), pp. 184-85; Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), pp. 132; Tinkler, 'Are You Really Living?', pp. 597-98.

suggests that they provide an accurate insight into how British women conceptualised extra-marital relationships and, specifically, their own involvement in them in the 1970s.

The main challenge levied against the use of media products as historical sources is the uncertainty surrounding readers' responses to them. Stuart Hall's 1980 piece 'Encoding/Decoding' has been influential in informing much of this scepticism. Hall asserted that scholars cannot assume that the audience takes the 'preferred reading' of media content, as in the 'common sense' meaning according to social and cultural codes, and must recognise that texts can be interpreted in seemingly logic-defying ways.²² As Daisy Payling and Tracey Loughran have noted, attempting to unravel the complicated web of meaning that audiences may have attached to magazine content is a 'notoriously difficult' task given the lack of explicit data exploring reader responses.²³ Carrying out such a task is beyond the scope of this dissertation, and it concedes that some readers would not have responded to content in the way that writers intended. However, this does not mean that an analysis of magazine content cannot indicate societal views towards female infidelity in the 1970s. As several scholars have observed, media products were ultimately business enterprises seeking to make a profit. Hence, to sustain sales, the views expressed within these publications had to resonate with the audiences they were trying to sell to.²⁴ Given that there exists little contemporary polling data or public opinion research about adultery,²⁵ this dissertation defends its use of media sources in illuminating attitudes towards female extra-marital relationships in this crucial decade.

Structure:

This dissertation will organise itself thematically, grouping together shared strands of discourse about extra-marital relationships across the women's magazine market. Chapter one will explore the large body of literature which advocated against female extra-marital relationships. Influenced by socially conservative ideas, these discourses sought to defend marriage against the perceived threat of infidelity and encouraged women to exercise sexual and emotional restraint. Chapter two will then turn to discourses which endorsed women having extra-marital liaisons, illustrating how they only supported adultery so long as it would not disrupt existing marriages. Chapter three will then zoom out from this debate, critically assessing the extent to which discourses which viewed extra-marital

²² Stuart Hall, 'Encoding/Decoding', in *Culture, Media, Language*, ed. by Stuart Hall and others (London: Unwin Hyman, 1980; repr. London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 117-27 (pp. 123-24).

²³ Daisy Payling, and Tracey Loughran, 'Nude Bodies in British Women's Magazines at the Turn of the 1970s: Agency, Spectatorship, and the Sexual Revolution', *Social History of Medicine*, 35 (2022), 1356-85 (pp. 1359-60).

²⁴ Adrian Bingham, *Family Newspapers? Sex, Private Life, and the British Popular Press 1918-1978* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 8-9; Francesca Cancian, and Steven Gordon, 'Changing Emotion Norms in Marriage: Love and Anger in U.S. Women's Magazines since 1900', *Gender and Society*, 2 (1988), 308-42 (p. 334).

²⁵ Elliott & Richards, p. 42.

relationships as a means to overturn marriages were able to infiltrate mainstream women's magazines. It will illustrate how women's magazines discredited these revolutionary discourses disseminated by both feminist thinkers and the Commune Movement. The failure to seriously consider these discourses signifies the extent to which the importance of marriage was entrenched in British society in the 1970s.

These chapters will recognise the diversity of discourses circulating about female infidelity in the 1970s while acknowledging their shared motivation to preserve marriage and maintain its cultural significance in British society. Together, they will cast doubt upon the widely held perception that people had lost faith in marriage in this decade.

Chapter 1 – ‘The Case for Fidelity’

It is important to note that social conservatism remained a prominent force in British society even during the ‘sexual revolution’.²⁶ The permissive values and reforms of the 1960s were not universally popular and many people objected to them on the grounds that they threatened traditional family values.²⁷ Individuals partaking in adulterous relationships featured in conservative narratives about Britain being in a state of moral decay. Such is apparent from Walter Meade’s 1974 *Cosmopolitan* piece ‘The Case for Fidelity’ which created the impression that the practice of monogamy was obsolete in British society. He presented married couples as victims of permissiveness, detailing the plight of one woman who stated, “couples who believe in open marriages and all that stuff can be tyrannical about it. I’ve even been accused of being neurotic because I don’t have affairs.”²⁸ This chapter will illuminate this anti-adultery facet of British social conservative thought in the 1970s, noting its prominence across a range of women’s magazines. It will argue that many writers condemned adultery on the grounds that it threatened marriage and instead promoted female sexual and emotional restraint in the name of marriage preservation. In highlighting the patchy acceptance of the values of the ‘sexual revolution’, this chapter will challenge narratives which present this as one of the deathblows to marriage in the 1970s.

There was no nuance in these writers’ views on extra-marital relationships: to transgress a marital contract was inherently wrong. Religion played an important part in shaping this opinion, as we can see from Mary Peterson’s 1974 piece “Thou Shalt Not...” which was published in *19*. Her article, likely influenced by conservative concerns about the decline of Church influence in British society,²⁹ sought to justify the Bible’s Ten Commandments and emphasise their relevance to the ‘present-day conscience.’³⁰ Her thoughts on the ‘Thou shalt not commit adultery’ commandment were as follows:

‘The honouring of contracts, civil or religious, is such a basic general (not merely sexual) moral principle that it’s reasonable to say: ‘Think long and hard before you make this contract; grit your teeth and fight the temptation to break it – or cause anyone else to break it.’³¹

²⁶ Matt Cook, ‘Sexual Revolution(s) in Britain’, in *Sexual Revolutions*, ed. by Gert Hekma and Alain Giami (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 121-40 (p. 131).

²⁷ Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800*. 4th edn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), pp. 274, 278-79.

²⁸ Walter Meade, ‘The Case for Fidelity’, *Cosmopolitan*, November 1974, pp. 116-17, 130-31 (p. 116).

²⁹ Sam Brewitt-Taylor, ‘Christianity and the Invention of the Sexual Revolution in Britain, 1963–1967’, *The Historical Journal*, 60 (2016), 519-46 (pp. 530-37).

³⁰ Mary Petersen, ‘Thou Shalt Not ...’, *19*, April 1974, pp. 100-03 (p. 100).

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

Peterson distinguished marriage from other relationships solely by its contractual nature and religious origins. Other writers drew upon more romantic notions about the mutual transformations that occurred within marriages to condemn adultery. 'The Case For Fidelity', for example, described emotional love as having transformative properties, with the 'merging of mind and spirit, flesh and soul' leading to a 'process of discovery and becoming.' Meade made the case that this transformation could only occur within monogamous marriages, writing that 'Marriage is the crucible for this intense personal drama; it can only be lived out by two people whose attention is focused upon one another.'³² Though differing in their ideological influences, these figures shared the belief that marriage was something special which needed to be protected against the immoral threat of adultery.

Fictional pieces offered a powerful medium through which anti-adultery writers could dissuade married women from having affairs. These pieces sought to warn women against the dangers of marital collapse. The story 'Daydreams' published in *Woman* in 1971 was a good example of this. This story followed a housewife called Anna who, amid struggling to care for her sick children, began reminiscing about her relationship with a lawyer, Stanley, during her university days.³³ She impulsively decided to call him but he did not pick up the phone.³⁴ A few days later, Stanley phoned her back. He expressed his affection for her and threatened to visit her.³⁵ Anna thought her marriage was under threat, lamenting at how she had 'almost brought the world down on her head.'³⁶ The thought of such a conclusion horrified her and she ended the call 'crying and sweating and shivering'.³⁷ In detailing Anna's emotional distress at the prospect of her marriage being threatened, the author emphasised the powerful and unwaning nature of a woman's love for her husband. This deep emotional bond came close to ruin because of a simple fantasy about another man spiralling into a potential intrusion into the family home. In jumping to such extreme conclusions, the story established a severe definition of marital exclusivity and attempted to instil within its readers a desire to remain faithful to their husbands.

Writers used fiction to paint a similarly catastrophic picture about single women having relationships with married men. A particularly pertinent example was a short fictional piece titled 'I'm Happy You Called' which was published in *Cosmopolitan* in 1972. This piece followed the character Pam Weston who was having an affair with a man called Michael. Following Michael's refusal to

³² Meade, p. 117.

³³ Merrill Joan Gerber, 'Daydreams', *Woman*, 10 April 1971, pp. 18-20, 23, 32, 34 (p. 18).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 32-33.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

spend Pam's birthday dinner with her, she called his wife, Mrs Melton, in a fit of rage and upset.³⁸ Pam goaded Mrs Melton, criticising her appearance with the statement 'He [Michael] said you look awful in nightgowns [...] he can see the rolls of fat around your stomach under them.' In contrast, Pam boasted that 'I'm young and pretty and I wear a bikini.'³⁹ This was not enough for her to win Michael, however. He refused to leave his wife despite her promising to grant him a divorce. Pam's cruelty caught up with her and she was left emotionally devastated. Howell detailed how 'when the tears stopped, there was only the dry, hacking convulsions of sorrow in her chest, throat, legs, scalp. Nothing but pain.'⁴⁰ The wife's victory, despite her lack of adherence to contemporary beauty ideals,⁴¹ attested to the power of marital love in generating incomprehensible levels of loyalty and devotion to one's spouse. This story acted as a dire warning to single women against having relationships with married men, reminding them of how they were incomparable to men's wives and foreshadowing the moral retribution that could arise from their actions.

The agony aunt was another important anti-adultery voice in women's magazines. While the previous writers sought to deter women from having affairs, agony aunts and letters page columnists were dealing with adulterous realities. Elliott and Richards have already used this source material to demonstrate ongoing societal hostility towards adultery in the 1970s, though their analysis centred heavily around agony aunts' discussions of men committing adultery.⁴² This section will build upon their work by analysing these figures' responses to women who had affairs, illustrating how they encouraged women to exercise emotional and sexual restraint in the name of preventing imminent marital breakdown.

The response to almost any letter confessing an affair began with moral condemnation. One woman wrote to *Woman's* agony aunt Evelyn Home in 1971, insisting that the contraceptive pill had increased her libido and caused her to engage in extra-marital sex. Home decried this, stating 'Why blame the pill for your own weakness?' She criticised the woman's moral character, accusing her of 'living a shallow, loveless life, caring nothing much for anything but odd spells of illicit excitement.'⁴³ Agony aunts delivered similar remonstrations to mistresses. Clare Rayner, agony aunt for *Petticoat*, was unsympathetic to a 20-year-old woman who did not want to stop seeing her married lover who had refused to leave his wife. Rayner remarked, 'I really can't be doing with this sort of self-pitying

³⁸ Barbara Howell, 'I'm Happy You Called', *Cosmopolitan*, April 1972, pp. 146-48, 152 (p. 146).

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁴¹ Anthony Ahrens, James Gray, and Mia Foley Sypeck, 'No Longer Just a Pretty Face: Fashion Magazines' Depictions of Ideal Female Beauty from 1959 to 1999', *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 36 (2004), 342-47 (pp. 342-43).

⁴² Elliott & Richards, p. 44.

⁴³ Evelyn Home, 'More Perils', *Woman*, 24 July 1971, p. 61.

whine.’ She criticised the woman’s lack of self-restraint, dismissing the idea that ‘love is like some great tidal wave that can’t be controlled in any way’ and insisting that ‘we are all in control of our own feelings to an extent’.⁴⁴ Rayner’s reproof of this young woman is particularly revealing given that she herself had been the subject of a tabloid storm for encouraging teenage readers to masturbate and use contraception.⁴⁵ This indicates that socially conservative attitudes towards infidelity influenced even more ‘permissive’ thinkers, suggesting that the idea that women who transgressed marital contracts were deviant figures was a fairly common one.

Having delivered a moral reckoning, agony aunts turned towards discussing damage control measures to ensure the survival of existing marriages. They presented the cessation of extra-marital relationships as instrumental in preserving marital integrity and family stability. This was particularly apparent in Evelyn Home’s response to a woman who asked whether she should continue her affair with her lover. Home’s response dripped with sarcasm, stating ‘If you’re ready to trade your happy home and family for the sake of a little sexual pleasure, then by all means carry on’.⁴⁶ Agony aunts offered similar advice to mistresses. Mary Grant, the longstanding agony aunt for *Woman’s Own*, responded to a letter from a woman who was asking for insights about her married lover who was feeling too guilty to leave his wife. Grant expressed sympathy for the man’s wife, writing that it was a ‘ghastly situation’ for her. She placed all responsibility on the mistress to save the marriage, ordering her to ‘get out of their lives’ and warning her that ‘you’ll never find a husband while you’re trying to steal someone else’s’.⁴⁷ These dismissals of the women’s individual circumstances complicates Adrian Bingham’s insistence that from the 1960s agony aunts ‘became less concerned with defending the institution of marriage and gave a higher priority to the feelings of the individual’.⁴⁸ On the contrary, these figures expected women to make individual sacrifices in the name of preserving existing marriages.

Agony Aunts also continued to peddle the concept of investing ‘emotional labour’ into a marriage to help it recover from an extra-marital affair, demonstrating concordance with their 1930s predecessors.⁴⁹ A woman wrote to Evelyn Home in 1970 and asked whether she was doing the right thing in planning to leave her husband for her lover. Home insisted that ‘so much misery comes from

⁴⁴ Claire Rayner, ‘I Only Want Him’, *Petticoat*, 11 November 1972, p. 47.

⁴⁵ Melanie Tebbutt, ‘From ‘Marriage Bureau’ to ‘Points of View’: Changing Patterns of Advice in Teenage Magazines, *Mirabelle* 1956-77’, in *People, Places and Identities: Themes in British Social and Cultural History, 1700s-1980s*, ed. by Alan Kidd and Melanie Tebbutt (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), pp. 180-201 (pp. 190-91).

⁴⁶ Evelyn Home, ‘No Lasting Secret’, *Woman*, 17 April 1971, p. 76.

⁴⁷ Mary Grant, ‘She Won’t Change’, *Woman’s Own*, 13 March 1978, p. 65.

⁴⁸ Adrian Bingham, ‘Newspaper Problem Pages and British Sexual Culture since 1918’, *Media History*, 18 (2012), 51-63 (p. 54).

⁴⁹ Charnock, pp. 373-74.

broken marriages. I assure you it is worth any trouble to avoid breakage.' Home's sense of urgency was reflected in the advice she offered. Dismissing the increasing importance of female labour to household economies during the cost of living crisis of the 1970s,⁵⁰ she insisted that the woman's husband might become the 'partner you want' if she 'gave up your job and your lover, and lavished all your attention and affection on your husband.'⁵¹ Not all writers encouraged such extreme measures. For example, Renatus Hartogs, *Cosmopolitan's* psychoanalyst, insisted that spicing up marital sex lives would vanish the urge to stray from struggling marriages. In 1972, a woman who described herself as 'compulsively promiscuous' wrote to him and asked for advice on how to handle her inability to stop having affairs. Hartogs urged her to stop her 'promiscuity', warning her that 'sooner or later it will endanger your marriage, even if your husband never finds out.' He insisted that her tendencies could be overcome if she tried to 'make your marriage as exciting, and your marital sex life as varied and "naughty" as your affairs. Why not have a torrid affair with your husband?'⁵² Uniting all this advice was the idea that extra-marital affairs provided nothing that a committed marriage could not. Marital weaknesses were indicative of individual failings, not weaknesses in the companionate model of marriage. This further illustrates the faith people held in this relationship model in the 1970s.

This chapter has shown how many writers in women's magazines joined the fight in defending marriage against the perceived threat of permissiveness, illustrating the limitations of the 'sexual revolution' in damaging people's faith in this relationship model. Convinced by the immorality of this behaviour, they drew upon a range of tactics in their attempts to dissuade women from having affairs. Fictional pieces warned women against the destruction that could arise from embarking upon an affair, reminding them of the risk of marital breakdown and impressing upon them the power of marital love. Agony aunts were also powerful anti-adultery voices, acting as moral adjudicators towards women who had affairs and dictating how they should save their marriages from being ruined by their infidelity.

⁵⁰ Helen McCarthy, *Double Lives: A History of Working Motherhood* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), p. 228. Ebook.

⁵¹ Evelyn Home, 'Can't Stand Much More', *Woman*, 7 February 1970, p. 68.

⁵² Renatus Hartogs, 'On the Couch', *Cosmopolitan*, May 1972, p. 39.

Chapter 2 – ‘Creative Infidelity’

According to the writers discussed in the previous chapter, permissive commentators were dangerous presences in British society. Their disregard for the concept of monogamy was seen as a serious threat to marriage and traditional family values. This chapter will critically assess these claims by carrying out a detailed analysis of the language used within articles which encouraged women to engage in extra-marital affairs. It will highlight how writers perpetuated the idea that extra-marital relationships should only ever supplement, and by no means supplant, a marriage. Far from encouraging unbridled sexual and emotional indulgence, writers constructed a set of rules for women to follow so that their adulterous relationships would not threaten existing marriages. Throughout its analysis, this chapter will demonstrate that societal faith in marriage stood strong amidst the distinctive social changes of the 1970s, further challenging narratives which trace its decline in this period.

These authors did not denounce adultery as inherently immoral and instead identified a series of factors justifying why women had affairs. For some, this meant arguing that marriages for many women were sexually unfulfilling. The opening to Linda Wolfe’s 1973 *Cosmopolitan* article ‘Can Adultery Save Your Marriage?’ remarked that ‘The idea may seem unthinkable to you, but many bored-in-bed wives say yes!’⁵³ Many other writers, however, engaged in a much deeper critique of marriage as an institution. Irma Kurtz’s 1973 *Cosmopolitan* article ‘Creative Infidelity’ argued that marriage was an oppressive system. She stated that wives often found themselves ‘left out, housebound, relegated to the company of young children, a victim of memories and regrets... still young but captive.’⁵⁴ Even publications which had a more domestic female audience delivered similar critiques. A feature published in *Woman’s Own* about a woman, Penny Hart, who was having an affair with her husband’s best friend stated that ‘Loneliness and boredom of young wives and mothers isolated on vast estates is a modern day problem.’⁵⁵ This language of physical entrapment within a marriage was not dissimilar to that used by contemporary feminist activists.⁵⁶

Hence, extra-marital sex was sometimes necessary to make these unhappy marriages bearable. A common trope within articles was that of the discontented housewife being rejuvenated by a passionate affair. A feature piece published in *She* which was written by an anonymous narrator who had an affair with a younger man provides a good example of this. The writer credited the affair with

⁵³ Linda Wolfe, ‘Can Adultery Save Your Marriage?’, *Cosmopolitan*, March 1973, pp. 80-82 (p. 80).

⁵⁴ Irma Kurtz, ‘Creative Infidelity’, *Cosmopolitan*, September 1973, pp. 92-93 (p. 93).

⁵⁵ Penny Hart, ‘I’m Having an Affair with My Husband’s Best Friend’, *Woman’s Own*, 14 April 1973, pp. 28-29, 43 (pp. 28-29).

⁵⁶ Lee Comer, for example, compared the married woman to a ‘chronic invalid’: Lee Comer, *Wedlocked Women* (Leeds: Feminist Books, 1974), p. 99.

helping her overcome the monotony of married life, detailing how ‘It must have been years since anyone had told me that I was beautiful and desirable and a really good lay.’⁵⁷ Even more domestic women’s magazines promoted extra-marital intimacy as a means through which to revive female confidence and sensuality. A good example of this was the fictional piece ‘Temptation’ which was published in *Woman* in 1975. The story’s narrator was accompanying her husband, David, on a work trip when she met a young French man, Jean Luc. When she kissed Jean Luc, she recalled how ‘I was engulfed in the flood of sensation and emotion that followed. I felt so young, so singingly, sweetly young!’⁵⁸ These intense emotions contrasted with the muted way she described her married life – ‘a contented existence, then, even a happy one’.⁵⁹

However, the key to these pieces’ justification of extra-marital affairs was their insistence that these purely sexual encounters posed no threat to the women’s marriages. The writer of the *She* feature stressed that her affair had reaffirmed the value of her marriage, remarking that ‘sex without love is good clean fun but sex with love is an experience on a different plane altogether.’ She also emphasised that she would not repeat her actions, stating that ‘Having a lover is so complicated its almost too much trouble.’⁶⁰ The fictional affair in ‘Temptation’ followed a similar trajectory. When Jean Luc suggested that they go back to his house to continue the affair, the narrator had a moment of realisation: ‘I wanted David. I wanted him now!’ She later reminisced that ‘our marriage has strengthened in the months that have passed since we visited Paris’ and that her ‘measured moment of forbidden romance’ had confirmed her desire to ‘never be unfaithful’ again.⁶¹ For both women, their extra-marital affairs were temporary and one-off deviations to help rejuvenate their marriages. These were examples of harmless affairs.

On the other hand, affairs that were used to escape unhappy marriages were widely condemned. Scholars who have argued that the 1969 Divorce Reform Act discredited marriage in the 1970s seem to have overlooked the multiplicity of negative discourses circulating about marital breakdown in this period.⁶² Linda Wolfe, no doubt influenced by contemporary concerns about divorce leading to youth delinquency,⁶³ remarked that few women had affairs with the intention of leaving their husbands as they did not think that their ‘children would be better off in a divorced and probably temporarily

⁵⁷ ‘The Man Who Came in with the Coal’, *She*, January 1973, p. 36.

⁵⁸ Annette Motley, ‘Temptation’, *Woman*, 19 April 1975, pp. 40-41, 44-45 (p. 44).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁶⁰ ‘The Man Who Came in with the Coal’, p. 36.

⁶¹ Motley, p. 45

⁶² Zoe Strimpel, ‘In Solitary Pursuit: Singles, Sex War and the Search for Love, 1977–1983’, *Cultural and Social History*, 14 (2017), 691-715 (p. 692).

⁶³ Ian Miller, ‘Ending the ‘Cult of the Broken Home’: Divorce, Children and the Changing Emotional Dynamics of Separating British Families, c. 1945–90’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 32 (2021), 165-88 (p. 166).

manless home.’⁶⁴ This shows that there was a paradox at the heart of pro-adultery discourses as they both echoed feminist critiques about the oppressive nature of marriage while emphasising its indispensability in British society. This highlights the limitations of feminism in fundamentally transforming how contemporaries viewed this relationship model and women’s roles within them, contrary to what Marcus Collins has suggested.⁶⁵ Writers further warned women against walking out of their marriages by emphasising the personal damages that this could incur. Marcia Kamien alluded to women’s financial dependence on their husbands, with her article ‘Think Hard Before You Walk Out On Your Marriage’ warning that ‘You might have to give up the town house or neighbourhood you love, the treasured holidays abroad, or whatever the luxuries are that your husband can bestow and your lover cannot.’⁶⁶ Kurtz’ article instead focused on the emotional trauma which could arise from marital breakdown. The piece opened with a story of a woman, Jane, who left her husband for her lover. This decision left her plagued with guilt and she stated that ‘down deep I know I can’t ever be married to anyone but my first husband.’⁶⁷ For these writers, divorce was not liberating, but a decision which would leave women financially vulnerable or prisoners of their own guilt. These negative discussions about leaving a husband for a lover emphasises the centrality of marriage improvement to writers’ moral justification of adultery.

Writers emphasised that the most important step in preventing an affair from being the cause of marital breakdown was refraining from forming a deep emotional connection with a lover. Kurtz’s article interviewed a marriage counsellor who stated that ‘There’s no real reason why a woman can’t make love with several men and still remain emotionally faithful to her husband.’⁶⁸ Her message was clear: while sexual infidelity was acceptable, emotional infidelity was a no-go territory. Jill Eckersley took a slightly softer stance in *19*, arguing that women could develop emotional connections with their lovers. However, she stressed that these feelings should never run as deep as the love they held for their husbands. She stated that ‘there are a million shades of feeling between the kind of love that lasts a lifetime and the kind of passing fancy that’s all over after you’ve gone to bed together.’⁶⁹ These pieces suggest that the emotional bonds forged within marriages, a cornerstone of the ‘companionate marriage’ ideal, continued to be placed on a pedestal in this decade. Marital love was distinct, special, and, crucially, not to be impinged upon.

⁶⁴ Wolfe, p. 82.

⁶⁵ Collins, pp. 195-98.

⁶⁶ Marcia Kamien, ‘Think Hard before You Walk out on Your Marriage’, *Cosmopolitan*, May 1976, pp. 72, 74, 76 (p. 76).

⁶⁷ Kurtz, p. 92.

⁶⁸ Kurtz, p. 93.

⁶⁹ Jill Eckersley, ‘Faithfulness: Who Cares?’, *19*, November 1972, p. 79.

Women's magazines offered similar advice to single women engaging in relationships with married men, emphasising that these should be little more than casual sexual encounters. Norma Klein's 1972 *Cosmopolitan* article 'Girls Who Have to Make It with Married Men' is just one example of an article which encouraged single women to have affairs with married men. Individualist rhetoric was a central component of the 'sexual revolution' and Klein's piece reflected this.⁷⁰ She encouraged single women to focus on their own needs and engage in individualistic pursuits of pleasure, insisting that 'an affair with a married man is an experience, like a nude swim on the beach at dawn, that shouldn't be missed.'⁷¹ However, Klein, alongside other writers,⁷² emphasised that the success of an affair with a married man was contingent upon it not threatening his marriage. She refused to entertain the possibility of single women usurping men's wives, insisting that 'The Seventies girl doesn't necessarily expect to marry her married man and, more significantly *wouldn't* even if he offered.'⁷³ Furthermore, she presented a married man's emotional detachment as the greatest benefit he could bring to an affair, remarking that this allowed women to have 'excitement, sex, friendship' without feeling 'trapped' or experiencing 'emotional hang-ups'.⁷⁴ When viewed through the lens of discourses endorsing extra-marital sex, the individualistic rhetoric espoused by permissive writers appears to be little more than a veneer to conceal concerns about maintaining the sanctity of marriage.⁷⁵

Given the dangers associated with forming emotional attachments to lovers, writers emphasised that only certain types of women were strong enough to engage in extra-marital affairs. Alida Baxter, in a piece published in *Cosmopolitan* in 1977, reminded mistresses that they were little more than distractions from home life for married men. Baxter described the women unknowing of this reality as 'blindingly kind, unwittingly self-sacrificing mistresses of England, their haloes tight on their furrowed brow'.⁷⁶ It is important to note that self-professed 'permissive' writers in women's magazines in the 1970s increasingly criticised the figure of the 'nice' or 'respectable' girl as dull. Instead, they praised 'naughty' or 'adventurous' single women who had casual sexual encounters with

⁷⁰ Jeffrey Weeks, *The World We Have Won* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 72.

⁷¹ Norma Klein, 'Girls Who Have to Make It with Married Men', *Cosmopolitan*, June 1972, pp. 132-33 (p. 133).

⁷² More examples: Maxine Daley, and Barbara Lochner, 'Men You May Never Have Considered', *Cosmopolitan*, September 1977, pp. 110-11, 120-21, 124, 128, 134, 136 (pp. 120-24); Angela Lambert, 'Could You Fancy an Older Man?', 19, March 1970, pp. 36-39 (p. 37).

⁷³ Klein, p. 132.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 133.

⁷⁵ This challenges some historians' views that the individualism of the 1970s threatened marriage: Emily Robinson, and others, 'Telling Stories About Post-War Britain: Popular Individualism and the 'Crisis' of the 1970s', *Twentieth Century British History*, 28 (2017), 268-304 (p. 294); Cas Wouters, 'Balancing Sex and Love since the 1960s Sexual Revolution', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 15 (1998), 187-214 (p. 207).

⁷⁶ Alida Baxter, 'What You Still Don't Know About That Married Man', *Cosmopolitan*, October 1977, p. 77.

numerous men.⁷⁷ Hence, it is likely that Baxter's likening of mistresses seeking serious relationships with married men to angels was not intended in a complementary way. Instead, we should see this as a denunciation of their naivety and their inability to embrace sexual liberalism. Writers delivered similar messages to married women. Marcia Kamien's article remarked that few women 'can embark on and enjoy a passionate extra-marital affair without thinking *perhaps I should leave my husband and start a new life with this man instead*'. She argued that this failure to separate sex from love was 'bound to take the fun out of sexual freedom.'⁷⁸ For both writers, the sexually 'liberated' woman recognised that she should not exercise her sexuality in such a way that it would threaten marriages. This suggests that marital contracts continued to place parameters around female sexuality even during the 'sexual revolution', further challenging the argument that the permissiveness of the 1970s was damaging to the institution of marriage.⁷⁹

This chapter has considered discourses which endorsed female extra-marital relationships in the 1970s. Writers only approved of these affairs so long as they did not disrupt existing marriages and they constructed rules for women to follow so that their endeavours would not prompt marital breakdown. Throughout its analysis, this chapter has demonstrated how marriage was so deeply ingrained in British society that many of the social changes of the 1970s failed to substantively damage its reputation. Though individualism, feminism, and sexual liberalism all influenced authors' endorsement of adultery, none of these ideologies resulted in them challenging the necessity of marriage in British society and all of them framed their discussions around marriage improvement. Furthermore, the consequences of divorce were only discussed in negative terms, further illustrating the extent to which people believed in the benefits of marriage in this decade.

⁷⁷ Rosalind Brunt, 'An Immense Verbosity': Permissive Sexual Advice in the 1970s', in *Feminism, Culture, and Politics*, ed. by Rosalind Brunt and Caroline Rowan (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1982), pp. 143-70 (pp. 144-45).

⁷⁸ Kamien, p. 72.

⁷⁹ For discussions about the failure of the 'sexual revolution' to overturn marriage see Sheila Jeffreys, *Anticlimax: A Feminist Perspective on the Sexual Revolution* (London: Women's Press, 1990), p. 68.

Chapter 3 – Grappling with Revolutionaries

This chapter will assess the extent to which revolutionary conceptualisations of female extra-marital relationships were able to infiltrate mainstream women's magazines in the 1970s. It will consider 'revolutionary' ideas as any which viewed extra-marital relationships as a means through which to overthrow marriage and establish alternative relationship models. Two categories of thinkers will be addressed: feminists who opposed monogamy and the Commune Movement. To discern how these thinkers conceptualised female extra-marital relationships, this chapter will look at sources such as underground publications and sociological studies of radical groups. It will illustrate how women's magazines further sought to defend the institution of marriage not just through preventing marital breakdown, but through preventing readers from meaningfully considering the revolutionary processes endorsed by these groups.

These new social movements were unsuccessful in their attempts to establish non-monogamous relationship models in British society. Likely for this reason, few historians discussing marriage in Britain in the 1970s have considered their campaigns.⁸⁰ This chapter will show how the failure of these groups deserves greater prominence in historians' accounts of marriage in this decade. Indeed, women's magazines' refusal to endorse alternatives to companionate marriages further illustrates the cultural hegemony of this relationship model in the 1970s.

Feminists Against Monogamy

Some thinkers in the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) rejected the concept of monogamous relationships, arguing that they limited women's freedoms and maintained their inferiority in gendered hierarchies.⁸¹ John Miles' 1973 article 'Jealousy' shows how this group of feminist thinkers perceived extra-marital affairs as a means through which women could overthrow what they saw as an oppressive system. This article was published in *Spare Rib*, an underground feminist periodical which actively defined itself against mainstream women's magazines and used its platform to disseminate radical political ideas about female liberation.⁸² In this article, Miles explored the implications of his wife, Sally, having a relationship with another man, Chris. Miles emphasised the need to overcome 'compulsive monogamy', remarking that it encouraged dependency to the 'point where it becomes suffocating.' Sally's extra-marital relationship had thus allowed her more 'freedom'

⁸⁰ Though Marcus Collins's work did consider 'Radical Feminism and Absolute Autonomy', his section only focused on separatism and political lesbianism in the WLM: Collins, pp. 187-193.

⁸¹ Victoria Robinson, 'My Baby Just Cares for Me: Feminism, Heterosexuality and Non-Monogamy', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 6 (1997), 143-57 (p. 144).

⁸² Zoe Delap, and Zoe Strimpel, 'Spare Rib and the Print Culture of Women's Liberation', in *Women's Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1940s-2000s* ed. by Laurel Forster and Joanne Hollows (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), pp. 46-66 (p. 49).

and ‘autonomy’ and Miles celebrated her actions as a ‘small victory over the forces that distort and fragment our lives.’⁸³ Hence, unlike the discourses in the previous chapter, Miles advocated for a genuine individualism in which women would put their personal needs before that of their husbands and families. Miles insisted that he and Sally needed to ‘reconstitute’ their relationship so that Chris could become a permanent presence in both their lives. Extra-marital relationships were thus not brief sexual flings to supplement marriages; they were acts of resistance which had the power to permanently reconfigure personal relationships and spur ‘a process of transformation’ in society.⁸⁴

This next section will use a case study of Erica Jong’s 1973 novel *Fear of Flying* to explore how these ideas survived the translation into the mainstream women’s press. Influenced by the underground feminist print culture of the 1970s, the novel is widely regarded as one of the crucial texts of the WLM.⁸⁵ *Cosmopolitan* published an abridged version of the novel in its April 1974 issue. Given that the magazine’s chief editor, Helen Gurley Brown, was hostile to including the more radical political demands of the WLM,⁸⁶ this inclusion of *Fear of Flying* offers a unique opportunity to assess how these ideas were conveyed to a mass audience.

It is first necessary to understand the revolutionary implications of Jong’s novel. The novel was a classic example of what Lisa Maria Hogeland has termed the ‘consciousness-raising’ genre of literature which was popular amongst feminist activists in the 1970s. This collection of literature followed female protagonists who increasingly understood their personal struggles as symptomatic of wider societal misogyny, leading to ‘a new and newly politicised understanding of herself and her society.’⁸⁷ In shifting away from the novel’s discussions about sex and instead focusing on its portrayal of marriage, as Joanne Barkan has done, we can identify how the main character and narrator, Isadora Wing, underwent a similar process of self-discovery.⁸⁸ Initially, Isadora, though admitting that she ‘had never been happy with the bourgeois virtues of marriage’, was unable to overcome ‘my fear of being alone, my need for security.’⁸⁹ Isadora started an affair with a lover, Adrian, and eventually left her husband, Bennet, for him.⁹⁰ Isadora was never particularly sexually satisfied by Adrian, describing

⁸³ John Miles, ‘Jealousy’, *Spare Rib*, September 1973, pp. 7-10 (p. 10).

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁸⁵ Jay Hood, ‘Desire and Fantasy in Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying*’, in *This Book Is an Action: Feminist Print Culture and Activist Aesthetics*, ed. by Jaime Harker and Cecilia Konchar Farr (2016), pp. 149-62 (pp. 150-51);

⁸⁶ James Landers, *The Improbable First Century of Cosmopolitan Magazine* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2010), pp. 258-59.

⁸⁷ Lisa Maria Hogeland, ‘Sexuality in the Consciousness-Raising Novel of the 1970s’, *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 5 (1995), 601-32 (p. 603).

⁸⁸ Joanne Barkan, ‘(Ms.)Reading Erica Jong’s *Fear of Flying*’, *Dissent*, 56 (2009), 97-100 (p. 100).

⁸⁹ Erica Jong, *Fear of Flying*. 40th Anniversary edn (New York: Open Road Media, 2013), pp. 165-66.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 359.

one sexual encounter with him as ‘no good’.⁹¹ Nor did he provide her with substantial emotional fulfilment.⁹² However, Isadora did not care about the actual dynamics of her adulterous relationship. Just the process of breaking free from her marriage was good enough for her and she celebrated that ‘Leaving Bennet was my first really independent action’.⁹³ Though she returned to see Bennett at the end of the novel, she was nonchalant about the future of their relationship. She insisted that she ‘wasn’t going to grovel’ for leaving him and that ‘whatever happened, I knew I would survive it.’⁹⁴ This shows how, across the course of the novel, Isadora overcame her need to be within marriage and was unapologetic about exploring alternative sexual and emotional relationships. This message chimed well with radical feminists of the 1970s, with the editors of *Spare Rib* printing an advertisement for the novel which stated that ‘Jong has a profound and intuitive understanding of what the Women’s Liberation Movement is truly about’.⁹⁵

However, the revolutionary undertone of the novel was diluted in the pages of *Cosmopolitan*. Though the editors did not change any of Jong’s prose, they did abridge the novel in such a way that its overall message was altered. Isadora’s troubled relationship with the institution of marriage made the final cut, as did her protestations at the oppressive nature of monogamy.⁹⁶ However, this version ended with Isadora, Bennet and Adrian’s shared sexual encounter. There was a sense that a change might occur in her romantic life, with Isadora wondering whether ‘This might be the beginning of some kind of understanding between us’. However, her hopes were dashed as both men refused to discuss the matter.⁹⁷ In ending on Isadora’s failed attempt to revolutionise her personal relationships, the abridged version ultimately normalised marriage and emphasised that trying to challenge its dominance was a futile endeavour. Isadora’s subsequent elopement with Adrian was not included, omitting her ultimate display of independence and radical rejection of marriage as an institution.

It is difficult to determine the editorial processes which resulted in such a decision. The editors did not mind associating the novel with feminism, commenting in the foreword at the beginning of the issue that it ‘contained all the eggs of the feminist litany’.⁹⁸ Perhaps they simply failed to understand the novel’s revolutionary undertones and were convinced they had captured its feminist nature by including Isadora engaging in extra-marital sex. Alternatively, they may have been trying to

⁹¹ Jong, p. 258.

⁹² Ibid., p. 367.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 566.

⁹⁴ Ibid., pp. 612-13.

⁹⁵ ‘Fear of Flying’, *Spare Rib*, May 1974, p. 32.

⁹⁶ Erica Jong, ‘Fear of Flying’, *Cosmopolitan*, April 1974, pp. 150-51, 153, 155, 158, 160, 165, 167, 170, 172, 174, 177, 179 (p. 158).

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 179.

⁹⁸ Deirdre McSharry, ‘Our Cosmo World’, *Cosmopolitan*, April 1974, p. 4.

deliberately curate a less subversive feminist message. Either way, their silence is revealing. It indicates either an inability or refusal to conceive of a society in which marital relationships were not a crucial component of the social fabric.

The Commune Movement

The British Commune Movement peaked in the 1970s, predominantly consisting of young people affiliated with a range of left-wing political movements, including the Anarchist Federation of Britain and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament.⁹⁹ Influenced by the WLM's campaigns for gender equality, the Movement rejected the concepts of the monogamous marriage and the nuclear family, arguing that they privileged men and maintained female subordination.¹⁰⁰ John Rigby's 1974 study into the British Commune Movement shows how practising non-monogamy was seen as an important step in liberating oneself from these institutions. One of Rigby's interviewees stated:

"The nuclear family is a repressive and horrible institution. It makes you realise how cruel two people can be to each other... By conventional standards we had a happy marriage for years. But we realised that during this time, with all our conflicts and problems, one of us had to give way – eventually that person gets destroyed."¹⁰¹

This person remarked that non-monogamous relationships "enable you to become more fully aware of each other as humans, clear up the misconceptions that develop through distorted perceptions."¹⁰² Though commune dwellers did not describe these liaisons as 'extra-marital', this interview demonstrates that many engaged in relationships (both sexual and non-sexual) with people aside from their spouses upon entering the Movement. They saw this as important in allowing for the transition from being oppressed within nuclear families in mainstream society to having freedom within communal living arrangements.

Likely due to the young composition of the movement, this revolutionary outlook on extra-marital relationships was mainly covered in publications aimed at teenage women. While writers simply did not engage with revolutionary feminist ideas, they directly tackled the ideologies of the Commune Movement. The message they sent to readers was a clear one: communal non-monogamy was not a legitimate alternative to monogamous marriages.

⁹⁹ Sangdon Lee, 'The Commune Movement during the 1960s and 1970s in Britain, Denmark and the United States', (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leeds, 2016), pp. 25-26.

¹⁰⁰ John Davis, and Anette Warring, 'Living Utopia: Communal Living in Denmark and Britain', *Cultural and Social History*, 8 (2016), 513-30 (pp. 520-23).

¹⁰¹ Andrew Rigby, *Alternative Realities: A Study of Communes and Their Members* (London: Routledge, 1974), p. 266.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, p. 267.

Some writers conveyed this message in subtle ways. Jill Eckersley's 1971 article in *19*, 'The Ones Who Get It Together', was a good example of this. Eckersley's piece adopted the style of an investigative journalism piece, interviewing people living in communes to uncover their living habits and views. She recounted how one commune dweller, Michael, spoke about the Movement's aim to achieve 'sexual liberation for both men and women'. Michael insisted that practising non-monogamy was an important component of this, claiming that 'we only feel jealous because we are conditioned to the idea of monogamy.'¹⁰³ Though Eckersley platformed these ideas with little critical engagement, her article was by no means an impartial assessment of the Commune Movement. At the end of the piece, she reflected on the future of the Movement, asking 'Is it really possible to build a society where loneliness, mistrust and jealousy disappear, to be replaced by freedom, love and tolerance?' She made her scepticism clear in her answer to the question, stating that 'The commune movement believes it is. All the rest of us can do is allow them the freedom to try.'¹⁰⁴ By distinguishing between 'them' and 'us', Eckersley augmented the alien status of the Commune Movement. Furthermore, her insistence that they could only 'try' to partake in non-monogamy emphasised her scepticism towards this relationship model and, implicitly, her preference for the companionate marriage ideal.

Other writers were more explicit in their ideological opposition to the Commune Movement, as can be seen from Anne Batt's 1970 opinion piece in *19*. Batt criticised the concept of non-monogamy, stating that 'a half share in two men definitely doesn't make a whole.' She further ostracised commune dwellers by presenting the feminist activists who influenced the Movement as dangerous outsiders. She objected to the idea that 'a minority of very vocal women are being allowed to give the impression that they speak for women as a whole. They don't.'¹⁰⁵ Batt's style speaks to a more combative trend within the mainstream British media in the 1970s, with journalists often turning to outright mockery or criticism to keep radical feminist ideas at bay.¹⁰⁶

This chapter has demonstrated how discourses which encouraged women to partake in extra-marital relationships with the intention of causing a revolution in British society failed to permeate into mainstream women's magazines. Either writers did not engage with these ideas, as was the case with feminist ideologies about non-monogamy, or they overtly challenged them, as evidenced by their coverage of the Commune Movement. The inability of writers to promote a society void of traditional

¹⁰³ Jill Eckersley, 'The Ones Who Get It Together', *19*, June 1971, pp. 52-54 (p. 53).

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁰⁵ Anne Batt, 'Home Sweet Home...', *19*, May 1970, p. 4.

¹⁰⁶ Kaitlynn Mendes, *Feminism in the News: Representations of the Women's Movement since the 1960s* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 35.

marital relationships speaks to the cultural significance of marriage in the 1970s, further challenging the idea that people had lost faith in this relationship model in this decade.

Conclusion

Mainstream women's magazines carried out numerous and complex discussions of female extra-marital relationships in Britain in the 1970s. Depending on their ideological influences, writers adopted varying moral stances on infidelity. However, all writers, regardless of how they viewed infidelity, sought to regulate both married and single women's behaviour so that it did not pose a threat to existing marriages. For anti-adultery writers, this meant encouraging women to exercise sexual and emotional restraint. These discourses were influenced by socially conservative ideas and sought to defend marriage against the supposed threat of permissiveness. Authors who endorsed female extra-marital relationships only did so on the condition that they did not lead to marital breakdown. Influenced by an array of new ideologies, they stopped short of committing to the wholesale condemnation of marriage and established a set of guidelines for women to follow so that their affairs would not threaten existing unions. Furthermore, writers either denounced or failed to acknowledge revolutionary discourses that encouraged female extra-marital relationships with the intention of overthrowing marriage and establishing alternative relationship models. This shows a universal desire to protect marriage from extra-marital relationships, whether they manifested in marital breakdown or women turning to alternative relationship models.

This fervour to defend marriage complicates dominant narratives of the history of marriage in Britain in the 1970s. The 'sexual revolution', so frequently cited as the nemesis of the companionate marriage, was neither omnipotent, nor even fundamentally opposed to this relationship model. Furthermore, writers' discussions about broader contexts, including feminist critiques of marriage, rising individualism, easier access to divorce, and social movements with revolutionary intentions, suggest that marriage was so entrenched within British society that writers could not conceive of a world without it. When viewed through the lens of discourses about female extra-marital relationships, the 'companionate marriage' appears not so much an outdated relic, but a relationship model that was deeply valued throughout British society in this period.

Though this dissertation has started to unpick the history of extra-marital relationships in Britain in the 1970s, it recognises that there is still more work to be done. Other media outlets, including national newspapers, films, and books, offer other exciting avenues through which to explore this topic. Historians may, for example, wish to investigate the tabloid press' discussions about female extra-marital relationships. Ranging from dramatic retellings of divorce cases involving adultery to

articles encouraging sympathy for men who had murdered their adulterous wives,¹⁰⁷ these sources could further unfold this history. This dissertation focused on women's involvement in extra-marital relationships due to this topic's relatively higher levels of media attention. However, cultural responses to men's involvement in these affairs, though less prominent, would further enrich our understandings of adultery in this period.

Finally, this dissertation has joined other scholars in reaffirming the value of incorporating extra-marital relationships into considerations of marriage within past societies. It urges historians to continue developing this small field of literature and looks forward to what new findings this may uncover.

¹⁰⁷ Some examples: "Adulterous Wife' Keeps Half Home', *Daily Mirror*, 20 March 1973, p. 13; 'I Killed My Wife — but I Loved Her Dearly', *Daily Mail*, 14 October 1975, p. 13.

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