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Foreword by Kutter Callaway

The Meaning of Singleness

Retrieving an Eschatological Vision
for the Contemporary Church



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Singleness in Society

Singleness in Early Modern Europe

As we envision the place of singleness, marriage, and family in early modern Europe (c. 1450–1800), our thinking is usually informed as much by imagination—or perhaps animated fairytales—as it is by real historical remembrance.

When we imagine the villages, towns and cities of Europe before 1800, we see these places bustling with nuclear families—husbands, wives and their children. We know, of course, that some people were neither spouses nor children, but they appear to us as random individuals caught temporarily at awkward points in the game of making marriages and sustaining conjugal families. . . . Yet what we imagine is only part of the story.¹

In actual fact, single individuals, and especially single women—who, it must be said at the outset, feature far more prominently within the historical record of singleness than their male counterparts,² and so, by necessity, also far more prominently in this chapter—formed a surprisingly sizable portion of that era’s population. For instance, historians believe that between 1575 and 1700, at least twenty percent of the adult population of England never married.³ Furthermore, while the twenty-first-century popular consciousness tends to imagine young maidens of this period being bartered into marriage

¹Judith Bennett and Amy Froide, “A Singular Past,” in *Singlewomen in the European Past*, ed. Judith M. Bennett and Amy Froide (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1999), 1.

²“Singleness is a gendered construct, with meanings that differ considerably for women and men. However, single men have been largely excluded from family and social history. As men do not change their title on marriage their status is concealed within many documents. As well as giving rise to practical difficulties in identifying never-married men in historical sources, this relative invisibility of bachelorhood is also indicative of the gendered significance of marriage.” Roona Simpson, “The Shadow of Marriage: Singleness in England 1914–1960,” *Feminist Review* (2010), 22.

³Amy M. Froide, *Never Married: Singlewomen in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 2.

in their early-to-mid teens, the single English woman generally enjoyed a period of some economic and social independence, before marrying at the average age of twenty-six. Single men of that era tended to marry even later. But the ranks of the unmarried did not consist of these young adults alone. They were joined by widows, widowers, divorcées, nuns, monks, priests, the disabled, “kept” women and mistresses, prostitutes, servants, unwed mothers, and more. For some, singleness was seasonal. For others, it was lifelong. And then there were those whose singleness tended to move somewhat more fluidly along that spectrum.

Despite the fact that singles comprised a diverse and significant subset of the early modern European population, societal attitudes toward them typically fluctuated from somewhat begrudging acknowledgment, through to ambivalence, and finally to outright negativity. This is perhaps no more keenly on view than in the lexical evolution of certain terms used to refer to unmarried individuals—and especially women—during that era. Prior to the late Middle Ages, terms used in reference to unmarried women—for example, “maiden” or *puella* (Latin for “girl”)—typically emphasized “her chastity, her purity, the delicacy and beauty of her body, her modesty, humility and openness of manner, and her freshness, incorruption and lack of ‘feminine passions.’”⁴ However, in the later centuries of this period, “spinster” gradually entered the vernacular as a prominent synonym. The term found its origin in the cottage industry occupation of one who spun textiles. Given the large proportion of spinners who were unmarried women, and the medieval practice whereby one’s occupation often functioned as a surname, “spinster” gradually became both a popular and even legal reference to the single woman of that period. For some time the term was largely neutral in tone, offering public recognition to a sizable demographic group whose membership had not only carved out for themselves a largely independent economic existence, but who also made a valuable contribution to broader society as a whole. However, by the end of the seventeenth century, the numbers of unmarried women had so swelled, and social anxiety about antimarital sentiment along with them, that public attitudes toward singleness began to harden. So it was that the

⁴Kim M. Phillips, “The Medieval Maiden: Young Womanhood in Late Medieval England” (PhD diss., University of York, 1997), 2.

European spinster came to be viewed through an increasingly negative and pitiable lens.

As the seventeenth century turned into the eighteenth, a second and more dominant lexical caricature began to gain ground—that of the “Old Maid” (i.e., the aged or superannuated virgin). Unlike the generally piteous spinster, the Old Maid was depicted as not only willfully opposed to marriage, but also narrow-minded and mean-spirited. The eighteenth-century English poem, *A Satyr Upon Old Maids*, evidences the extent to which this woman was regarded as a dangerous and polluting presence in society. The anonymous author rails against his subjects as “odious, . . . impure, . . . nasty, rank, rammy, filthy Sluts,” who ought to “throw themselves into the ‘vilest’ marriages . . . just to avoid being ‘piss’d on with Contempt’ for their singleness.”⁵

In the space of just a couple of centuries, England’s single women had gone from being the romanticized subject of ballads, to women of some economic independence, to inert victims of circumstance, and finally to objects of public ridicule, derision, and even hatred. The dominant discourse which led to this changing narrative was substantially nationalistic in form. As Susan Lanser argues, “The English construction of the old maid is connected to an urgent perceived interest in increasing the British population . . . [and therefore] a dramatic discrediting of the female body that did not reproduce.”⁶ An artifact of this sentiment is found in the eighteenth-century proverb, “In ancient sayings we hear tell, of maidens leading apes in hell. But younger maidens it is said, lead puppies to their wedding bed.”⁷ Though bizarre to modern ears, within its own historical context this rhyme allied the fruitless old maid with the ape, an animal who was likewise considered to be a pitifully unproductive species (and all of this in contrast to the ripe fertility of dogs and younger maidens!). So it was that “Ape Leader” developed as an alternative designation of scorn for the older unmarried woman. British leadership of that era considered several schemes to decrease the number of its

⁵*A Satyr Upon Old Maids*, (London: W. Denham, 1713). Cited in Susan S. Lanser, “The Rise of the British Nation and the Production of the Old Maid,” in *Singlewomen in the European Past 1250–1800*, ed. Judith M. Bennett and Amy Froide (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 1999), 297.

⁶Lanser, “Rise of British Nation,” 309.

⁷For a striking visual depiction of this proverb see *Old Maids Leading Apes*, June 16, 1797, print, 201mm x 246mm, published by Laurie & Whittle, The British Museum, www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1991-0720-42.

citizens who remained unmarried. These included the proposal of a tax on single individuals, the public auctioning of unmarried women, directories of eligible spinsters and bachelors, and the institution of marital lotteries such as the 1709 *Love Lottery: Or, A Woman the Prize*.⁸ By the close of the eighteenth century, Britain's unmarried, and particularly her never-married women, had truly become problematic and even contemptible figures.

As the societal status of the unmarried woman continued to decline into abject marginality, the standing of her married counterpart enjoyed an opposite fate. In her landmark book *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage*, Stephanie Coontz observes how, prior to the industrial revolution, the marital relationship “was not primarily about the individual needs and desires of a man and woman and the children that they produced.”⁹ Throughout most of European history, the domestic household comprised an inclusive grouping of individuals including husband, wife, and children, but also extended family members, apprentices, servants, orphans, and other adults (most notably, spinsters and widows). Furthermore, the family home principally operated as the arena in which outward facing economic and social activity was to be cultivated. All members of the family (including children) were expected to play an important functional role in the domestic production of goods. It was this which secured the family's place within society while also reciprocally contributing to the well-being of that same society. As a result, spouses within Protestant-influenced Europe “were warned not to love one another too much, and parents prepared themselves and their children for separation . . . [The] family's image of itself was thin and insubstantial.”¹⁰

However, the industrial revolution of the late eighteenth century brought with it a period of radical change, and this not least in the fostering of an inward facing character of the domestic household. As the center of economic production was increasingly relocated from the home to the factory, and the “banks and stock market replaced family and kin as sources of capital,”¹¹ a new ideal of marriage and the family began to develop. It was an ideal that drained

⁸Froide, *Never Married*, 17.

⁹Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005), 6.

¹⁰John R Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making: Myth, Ritual and the Quest for Family Values* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 63.

¹¹Gillis, *Their Own Making*, 70.

the family household of its principal political, economic, and social significance and began to largely redirect its purposes in on itself, especially with respect to affectionate relations. As Stuart Ewen observes, where a preindustrial society “had necessitated the integral relations of the family and the community, the industrial system reified separations . . . [such that] stripped of internal necessity the family was weakened, left to the cohesion of emotional bonds.”¹² By the close of the century, the character of marriage had been largely renarrated as private rather than public, and so also it was expected that the bonds which would sustain marital and familial relationships were principally to be found in private affection, rather than public significance. At the same time, the highly competitive and individualistic ethos of the newly capitalistic society progressively displaced nonbiological members from the household, thereby intensifying the development of the family unit of husband, wife, and children as its own sequestered social system.

As the newly industrialized European society placed increasing demands on both adults and children to seek employment outside the home, it became ever more difficult for a family to balance necessary wage-earning activity alongside the ongoing demands of maintaining the household. This meant that when one’s children came of age to enter waged employment, many mothers tended to retire from the workforce in order to focus on domestic duties (which were now much more clearly delineated from economic and production duties). Over time, there began to emerge a societal expectation that husbands and wives were rightly called to occupy different, yet corresponding spheres of life. This paradigm of the male breadwinner and female homemaker—“which made men and women dependent upon each other and [insisted] that each gender was incomplete without marriage”¹³—became the organizing principle of not only the nineteenth-century institutions of marriage and family, but also of the internal affective relationships which was seen to govern both. Such a necessarily superior positioning of marriage and family—and, by implication, a corresponding marginality of singleness—was confirmed in Great Britain by the Queen herself. Following her marriage in the middle of the nineteenth century, Victoria was not only

¹²Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 117.

¹³Coontz, *Marriage, a History*, 176.

epitomized as the superlative ideal of domestic femininity, but her strongly affectionate relationship with her husband was depicted as the embodiment of the romantic ideal (even as the real character of their marriage was likely far more complicated).¹⁴

Singleness in Colonial and Postcolonial America

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, marriage for colonial women—and especially early marriage—was considered exceedingly normative. Within a society whose male population far outstripped its female counterpart, singleness was typically regarded as “a sinful state, an evil to be exorcised from community life because single women menaced the social order.”¹⁵ A woman need only remain single past the age of twenty-three to be classified as a spinster, while those just three years her senior were labeled “thornbacks” after a sharp, spiny, and particularly unattractive stingray-like creature. The Blue Laws of the New Haven Colony went so far as to specify that the head of the family with whom any single individual resided was to “duly observe the course, carriage, and behavior of every such single person . . . [and] then complaine [*sic*] of any such disorder, that every such single person may be questioned and punished if the case requires it.”¹⁶ However, with the progression of time and independence, negative societal attitudes toward singleness in the early United States began to abate a little. Scorn, fear, and derision were gradually replaced with somewhat begrudging tolerance. In fact, women who held to the convention that it was better to remain single than to be miserably married even garnered some degree of (albeit, hesitant) social respect. And yet, despite these somewhat positive shifts the dominant American discourse of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries continued to regard marriage as the ideal state for both men and women to enter, as the best service of country.

Within the southern states of the antebellum period (1783–1861), this ideology resulted in the development of two alternative constructs of middle- to

¹⁴Jane Ridley, “Queen Victoria: The Real Story of Her ‘Domestic Bliss,’” *BBC*, January 1, 2013, www.bbc.com/news/magazine-20782442.

¹⁵Lee Virginia Chambers-Schiller, *Liberty, A Better Husband: Single Women in America: The Generations of 1780–1840* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 11.

¹⁶*The Blue Laws of New Haven Colony, Usually Called Blue Laws of Connecticut* [. . .] *Interesting Extracts*, (Hartford, CT: Case, Tiffany & Company, 1838), 211.

upper-class, White womanhood. On one hand, the “Cult of True Womanhood/Domesticity” exhorted such women to eagerly exemplify an idealistic model of femininity defined by their role as wife, mother, and homemaker. On the other hand, its dialectical alternative, the “Cult of Single Blessedness,” called unmarried women to embrace a vocation “higher than marriage,” that is a life of self-abnegation in which they were “pious vessels whose commitment to service, undiluted by the needs of husbands or children, made them perfect servants of god, family, and community.”¹⁷ Following the Civil War, many “surplus” single women were offered transportation to the West where they might be matched with frontier men. Others traveled to the frontiers alone to take up parcels of land for themselves.

As the US transitioned from an agrarian to an industrial economy, lower-class unmarried women began to find employment in factories, while middle- and upper-class (White) single women often pursued professional and intellectual opportunities, particularly in the fields of teaching and nursing. Eventually the Progressive Era (c.1890–1920), marked by enormous social and political change, witnessed the highest proportion of single women in US history. Unmarried women increasingly sought employment in an ever-expanding field of occupations, built on their independence, gained the right to vote alongside their married counterparts, and took up varying opportunities for female autonomy as necessitated by the drafting of men for military service during the years of World War I and II.

Singleness in the Twentieth-Century West

Despite these substantial societal changes, or perhaps because of them, the first decades of the twentieth century in the West still very much reasserted the priority of marriage and the family for the sake of the nation. In the years following World War I, public leaders on both sides of the Atlantic began to express increasing concern at the prevalence of single women in society. Indeed, it is thought there were as many as two million “surplus” unmarried English women at that time, while Germany was home to approximately 500,000 war widows. As married and single men alike returned from the frontlines—many with tremendous physical and emotional

¹⁷Rebecca Traister, *All the Single Ladies: Unmarried Women and the Rise of an Independent Nation* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2016), 45.

trauma—psychologists and sexologists increasingly pathologized the “inverted” woman who chose not to pursue normative heterosexual marriage or remarriage. As the early modern dogma of domestically oriented femininity in marriage became steadily reasserted within Western society more broadly, the single woman came to be progressively characterized as rebellious and deviant. The final years of the 1920s witnessed a substantial decrease in both the number of single individuals in society, and in the median age of marriage, thus making it the “decade in which the backlash against single women would develop full force.”¹⁸

And yet the 1920s and 1930s were to prove mere precursors to the “marriage boom” of post-World War II Western societies. A variety of midcentury social, political, and economic causes conspired to result in the enthusiastic re-assertion of the postindustrialized ideology of marriage as privately focused and affectively sustained. Alongside this was a need to entice women to vacate war-time jobs in order to create employment for returning soldiers. This assisted in the reemphasis of marriage as a relationship whose members were distinctively oriented toward different spheres. The highest calling for middle- and upper-class women of that time became seen as “the maintenance of a domestic sanctuary for men on whom they would depend economically.”¹⁹

So began the golden era of the so-called nuclear family. Though the term was originally coined in the first decades of the twentieth century (most likely by Austrian-Hungarian anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski), it was 1950s sociological research which resulted in its pervasive popularization and positioning within the West. The term had initially been devised to refer to the sense in which husband, wife, and children were vitally linked together in a relationship that was itself considered central to broader kinship networks. That is, husband, wife, and children were not considered to be the sum total of the familial unit, but rather the nucleus or kernel around which all other potential parts were gathered. However, in line with the midcentury ideal of self-determining freedom and the agility of an increasingly individualistic and competitive capitalistic society, the unit of father, mother, and child(ren) underwent significant reconceptualization. The nucleus moved from being

¹⁸Joann Maria Vasconcellos, “Befriending Ambivalence: Single Women Constructing Identity” (PhD diss., Boston College, 1999), 51.

¹⁹Traister, *Single Ladies*, 64.

that which the larger kinship system rotated around, to that which was progressively isolated and detached from such extended relational networks. In his 2020 article, “The Nuclear Family Was a Mistake,” David Brooks argues that “a kind of cult formed around this type of [nuclear] family—what *McCall’s*, the leading women’s magazine of the day, called ‘togetherness.’”²⁰ The white picket fence became a metaphor for the nuclear family’s self-sustaining capacity, internally-focused togetherness, and privatized relational seclusion.

During this period, women were encouraged to marry, and to do so young, in order to better facilitate happy family life. Many Western women of the mid-twentieth century tended to become engaged in their late teens and married around twenty or twenty-one. In fact, those who reached adulthood either during or soon after World War II, became the generation with the highest marriage rates on record, with 96.4 percent of American women who came of age during that period getting married.²¹ While marriage rates for men in the West during that same period were likewise high, single men were also encouraged to enjoy an unfettered lifestyle while they may. This legitimization of “bachelorhood” was in no small part fostered by the unprecedented success of *Playboy* magazine (first published in 1953) which sought to “invest the bachelor life with positive content, promoting its masculinity as comprised of refinement in taste and the pursuit of sensual variation.”²² While bachelorhood provided an alternative and positive masculine identity divorced from the spheres of marriage, fatherhood, and family, unmarried women largely continued to live under the shadow of their historical spinster and old maid counterparts.

Although the effects of the marriage boom did carry through into the 1960s, a growing tendency toward countercultural movements and social activism gradually eroded the heightened conformist expectations of the previous decade. As the second half of the twentieth century dawned, the median age for marriage rose significantly.²³ An ever-increasing proportion of men

²⁰David Brooks, “The Nuclear Family Was a Mistake,” *The Atlantic*, March 2020, www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/03/the-nuclear-family-was-a-mistake/605536.

²¹Frank Alexander Larsen, “From Fatherhood to Bachelorhood: An Analysis of Masculinities in the 1950s US through *Forbidden Planet*, *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, and *Playboy*” (masters thesis, University of Oslo, 2012), 61.

²²Larsen, “From Fatherhood,” 62-63.

²³US Census Bureau, “Historical Marital Status Tables,” November 2021, www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/families/marital.html.

and women began prioritizing their education and career, with many choosing not to marry until well into their thirties and even forties. The introduction of no-fault divorce and increased availability of contraception also served to indirectly rehabilitate the image of singleness and forced a somber reckoning with the romanticized mythology that society had built around marriage and the family. While the burgeoning mainstream feminist movement of the 1970s did little to disrupt the pervasive normativity of marriage and parenthood for women, more progressivist feminist voices eventually came to argue that marriage and motherhood did not define the female identity. Ultimately, the 1970s set the stage for the final decades of the twentieth and the initial decades of the twenty-first centuries, in which the education, professionalization, economic sufficiency, sexual liberation, and representation of women in popular culture gave rise to a burgeoning number of singles, and particularly single women.

Singleness into the New Millennium

Since the 1960s, Westernized societies' attitudes toward marriage, the significance and shape of romantic partnerships, family formation, and the place of singleness have undergone dramatic and seemingly constant modification. While it is very important to recognize that unique demographic differentials such as gender, education, ethnicity, wealth, religiosity, and other contextual factors all provide significant nuance and qualifications to these social trends, it remains nonetheless true that there has been a general pattern away from marriage in the West. Between 1972 and 2017, marriage rates in the United Kingdom fell a remarkable 75 percent for men and 69 percent for women, making them the lowest since records began in 1862.²⁴ Similarly, the 2019 4.3 crude marriage rate for the entire European Union (i.e., the number of marriages within a given population in a given year, expressed as marriages per 1,000 people) represented a fall of almost 50 percent since 1964.²⁵ Across the

²⁴Office for National Statistics, "Marriages in England and Wales: 2017," April 14, 2020, www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/marriagecohabitationandcivilpartnerships/bulletins/marriagesinenglandandwalesprovisional/2017#numbers-and-rates.

²⁵Eurostat, "Marriage and Divorce Statistics," *Eurostat Statistics Explained*, www.ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Marriage_and_divorce_statistics, accessed December 20, 2021, and Eurostat, "Is Marriage Popular In Your Country?," *Products Eurostat News*, May 13, 2021, www.ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20210513-1.

Atlantic, the American marriage rate of 9.8 per 1,000 people in the 1990s had decreased to just 6.1 in 2019.²⁶ In fact, between 2006–2016 the number of never-married Americans increased across *both* genders *and* all age brackets.²⁷ Between 1981 and 2011 Canada experienced a 44 percent increase in the proportion of their population who were unmarried.²⁸ Australia's 2019 crude marriage rate of 4.5—the country's lowest recorded, prior to the pandemic period of 2020–2021 in which government restrictions on gatherings resulted in the rate plummeting to 3.1²⁹—represented a full 25 percent drop since 1999.³⁰ For every 1,000 New Zealanders eligible to marry in 2019 only ten couples did so—a decrease of more than 50 percent in 30 years.³¹ While demographers and social commentators variously identify a large and complex range of underlying reasons to be informing these trends, they all tend to agree on one thing: not only are citizens of Western nations consistently choosing to wed later in life (and thus spend a far greater proportion of their lives unmarried), but the proportion of those who never marry at all is steadily increasing.

Some argue that these marital statistics indicate an inexorable trend away from marriage and an international movement toward that form of life's rejection—what Jean-Claude Kaufmann calls the “Globalization of Singlehood.”³² And yet I have already observed that a binary categorization of married/unmarried cannot provide a comprehensive, nuanced, or truly accurate depiction of the sociological prevalence and definitional meaning of singleness in the twenty-first century. From long-term monogamous relationships; a

²⁶Statista Research Department, “Marriage Rates in the United States from 1990 to 2019,” *Statista*, March 2, 2021, www.statista.com/statistics/195951/marriage-rate-in-the-united-states-since-1990/.

²⁷United States Census Bureau, “Never Married on the Rise: Percentage of Never Married Adults by Sex and Age,” April 22, 2021, www.census.gov/library/visualizations/2021/comm/never-married-on-the-rise.html.

²⁸Anne Milan, “Marital Status: Overview 2011,” July 2013, www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/91-209-x/2013001/article/11788-eng.pdf.

²⁹Australian Bureau of Statistics, “Marriage and Divorces, Australia (2020),” November 24, 2021, www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/marriages-and-divorces-australia/2020.

³⁰Australian Bureau of Statistics, “Marriages and Divorces, Australia (2019),” November 27, 2020, www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/marriages-and-divorces-australia/2019.

³¹“New Zealand Marriage Rates Lowest Since 1960s, New Data Reveals,” *New Zealand Herald*, May 5, 2020, www.nzherald.co.nz/lifestyle/new-zealand-marriage-rates-lowest-since-1960s-new-data-reveals/4GBUY4YIKWSDVBVT64HLVTMYTHU/.

³²Jean-Claude Kaufmann, *The Single Woman and the Fairytale Prince* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2008), 184.

sequence of short-term sexual “hook ups” (increasingly facilitated by apps and social media); civil unions; de facto partnerships and cohabitation; the denunciation of all and any form of romantic or sexual relationship; “friends with benefits”; same-sex unions and marriage; polyamorous arrangements; open sexual relationships; long-distance and online relationships; platonic and queer partnerships; to civil and/or religious opposite-sex marriage itself—the fact is that “censuses and other sources of data do not provide an appropriate category to report [these realities] under the overall reporting of marital status.”³³ As a result, governmental statistics almost certainly tend toward an artificially inflated perception of the number of genuinely single individuals in society today.

This qualification notwithstanding, the sociological and demographic data *does* all point in one inexorable direction. In all its permutations and manifestations, singleness is continuing to become increasingly prevalent and significant within the contemporary West. It would thus seem reasonable to expect that this statistical trend toward singleness has been matched by an increasing sense of legitimacy and affirmation of singles within today’s societal milieu. And yet, somewhat confoundingly, the very same societies in which singleness has become so much more prevalent often remain strikingly intransigent in their cultural acceptance of it. Indeed, it appears that contemporary singleness has found itself caught in the riptide of a palpable cultural lag in which marriage, or at the very least intimate romantic and sexual partnership, continues to be idealized as socially normative and responsible.

It would be difficult to overstate the profound role that the media and popular culture have played in informing the contemporary societal consciousness on this count. The teleological quest for love—that finds its fulfillment in the anticipated happily ever after—is so deeply embedded in today’s popular culture that the study of singleness is “necessarily also a study of how these ideologies of romantic love operate in our media saturated environment.”³⁴ From reality TV shows such as *Married at First Sight*,

³³United Nations—Department of Economic and Social Affairs Population Division, *World Fertility Report 2009* (New York: United Nations, 2011), 13.

³⁴Anthea Taylor, *Single Women in Popular Culture: The Limits of Postfeminism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 19.

The Bachelor and the *Bachelorette*, *Dating Naked*, *Love is Blind*, *Love on the Spectrum*, *Sexy Beasts*, and countless others; to (virtual) bookshelves swelling with contemporary, historical, and fantastic romantic fiction; through to the preponderance of animated and live-action films which reinvigorate the notion of the fairytale, the pursuit of romantic love continues to hold captive our collective imagination. Even iconic examples which make a self-conscious claim to rehabilitate the modern “singleton”—for instance, the *Bridget Jones’ Diary* franchise, the TV series *Sex in the City*, the breakout movie *I Feel Pretty*, or nearly any contemporary adaptation of a Jane Austen novel—inevitably serves to reinforce the metadiscourse of completion to be found in coupledness. It is a truth universally acknowledged that the single heroine (or less commonly, hero) who remains genuinely content in their unpartnered state right through to the closing credits does not sell movie tickets, book copies, or streaming subscriptions.

Two further supplementary narratives correspond to the new millennium’s ongoing fascination with the ideology of romantic love. The first of these is what I refer to as the “maturation narrative.” Alongside completion of education, leaving home, and securing financial independence, modern sociologists have long regarded marriage (and childbearing) as necessary milestones that mark an individual’s transition to adulthood. The unilaterally increased median age for marriage of recent decades has thus led to a growing social lament over a delayed timetable of maturity. With extended years of singleness increasingly perceived as a “failure to launch,” unpartnered men in their twenties and thirties are often dismissively referred to as “kidults” and caricatured as unemployed, video-game playing, layabouts who take advantage of their parents’ largesse, as well as their basement. For their part, single females of the same age are typically depicted as reveling in a prolonged period of girlish preoccupations with inane trivialities such as shoes and gossip. Older single women are considered to have missed out on the adventures that authentic adult life brings (and so are depicted as having retreated to a life of semi-isolation with their many feline companions), while their male counterparts are often dismissed as commitment-phobic “Peter Pans” or troubled “mommy’s boys.” Although generational peculiarities suggest limited justification of *some* aspects of these stereotypes, the persistent tendency to regard those who

“have not made the journey into adulthood that romantic love entails [as being] less mature than people who have”³⁵ is at odds with the significant trend toward singleness for people across the full developmental spectrum of physical, psychological, and emotional maturity.

The second supplementary discourse which arises from a twenty-first-century ideology of romantic love and marriage is what I designate the “completion narrative.” While certainly not the origin of this narrative, the 1996 movie *Jerry Maguire* is an enduring depiction of it. As the film reaches its climactic moment, the handsome and professionally successful male protagonist stares intently at his vulnerable, though charmingly quirky, love interest, and insistently proclaims, “I love you. You. Complete. Me.” At the heart of the modern couplist discourse lies the notion that existential completion is attained through romantic partnership with one’s “soulmate,” the one who truly makes our soul whole. Where true personal realization is attained through romantic union with a usually predestined individual, those who are single are not simply destined to live an unfulfilled life. They are seen as intrinsically unfulfilled, deficient, and incomplete *in their own existential selves*. They are merely an incomplete part of an unfulfilled whole.

Further evidence of the maladjustment between increasingly pervasive trends toward singleness and its positioning within contemporary Western society is revealed by varying levels of stigma, stereotype, and discrimination which singles are subjected to. Historical sociologist Erving Goffman argues that when an individual is seen to possess an “attribute that makes him different from others . . . and of a less desirable kind . . . he is thus reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one.”³⁶ Secular researchers who evaluate the societal perception of those who are single frequently conclude the veracity of this observation. Society often perceives married individuals to be more happy, satisfied, and content with their lives than those who have never married or who are no longer married. Bella DePaulo and Wendy Morris have noted the consistency with which “participants in our studies painted the lives of singles in mostly sad strokes, while they filled

³⁵Bella M. DePaulo and Wendy L. Morris, “Singles in Society and in Science,” *Psychological Inquiry* 16, nos. 2–3 (2005): 60.

³⁶Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1963), 3.

in the lives of couples with warm and fuzzy love.”³⁷ Tobias Greitemeyer observes how singles are often perceived as “less extraverted, less agreeable, less conscientious, more neurotic . . . less physically attractive, less satisfied with their lives, as having a lower self-esteem, and as being less sociable.”³⁸ In *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier and Better off Financially*, Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher conclude that married men and women “report less depression, less anxiety, and lower levels of other types of psychological distress.”³⁹ Others suggest that married people have longer life spans and are less inclined to commit suicide.⁴⁰

Another sense in which intimate coupling is seen to result in superior happiness and well-being is revealed in the stigmatization of sexually inexperienced adults. Although being single within contemporary secular society does not necessarily result in limited or delayed sexual experience for all (or perhaps even for most), strong connections between sexual inexperience and singleness do exist within some demographic groups, and particularly those who are socially and/or religiously conservative. The authors of “Has Virginity Lost Its Virtue?” demonstrate that not only do sexually inexperienced adults report experiencing significant stigmatization, but nearly all study participants indicated that they themselves preferred partners who had higher levels of intimate relational experience. They conclude that because “intimate relationships are essential to well-being, especially across the adult life course, it seems that being a late bloomer with sexual debut could be associated with negative social and interpersonal consequences.”⁴¹ This is well demonstrated within the realm of popular culture by films such as the 2005 release, *The 40 Year Old Virgin*. It is similarly found in the comedic characterization of young

³⁷DePaulo and Morris, “In Society,” 79. See also, Robyn Penman, “Current Approaches to Marriage and Relationship Research in the United States and Australia,” *Family Matters*, no. 70 (2005): 28; and Lixia Qu and Grace Soriano, “Trends: Forming Couple Relationships: Adolescents’ Aspirations and Young Adults’ Actualities,” *Family Matters*, no. 68 (2004): 43.

³⁸Tobias Greitemeyer, “Stereotypes of Singles: Are Singles what we Think?,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 39, no. 3 (2009): 380.

³⁹Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People are Happier, Healthier and Better Off Financially* (New York: Broadway Books, 2002), 67.

⁴⁰See Marita P. McCabe, Robert A. Cummins, and Yolanda Romeo, “Relationship Status, Relationship Quality, and Health,” *Journal of Family Studies* 2, no. 2 (1996): 109; Penman, “Current Approaches,” 27.

⁴¹Amanda N. Gesselman, Gregory D. Webster, and Justin R. Garcia, “Has Virginity Lost Its Virtue? Relationship Stigma Associated With Being a Sexually Inexperienced Adult,” *The Journal of Sex Research* 54, no. 2 (2017): 212.

adults who are yet to become sexually active, as per a particularly memorable line from the 1995 cult cinematic hit *Clueless*—“Why should I listen to you anyway? You’re a virgin who can’t drive.”⁴²

Commentators observe how society’s overtly positive perception of romantic partnering and marriage is further expressed through consistently more positive treatment of individuals who hold that status. In fact, some such as Morris and DePaulo argue that singles are subject to a specific form of discrimination they dub “singlism.”⁴³ Such discrimination is not thought to be simply manifested in cultural attitudes toward those who are single, but also in governmental laws, societal policies, and welfare allowances which consistently privilege the couple. For instance, unmarried American women are thought to “pay as much as a million dollars more than their married counterparts for healthcare, taxes and more”⁴⁴ across their lifetime. Those observing the phenomenon of singlism in the West suggest that it is so deeply entrenched within public consciousness and social action that it is usually exercised without compunction, intentionality, and even awareness.

And yet, when all this stereotypically-informed stigmatization is compared to the material facts, as well as to the self-perception of single adults themselves, the conclusions are not nearly so dialectically apparent. While many single individuals do feel levels of dissatisfaction with their relationship status, there is strong evidence to suggest that this specific sense of dissatisfaction does not automatically equate with general life dissatisfaction.⁴⁵ Additionally, conclusions that married people are unilaterally happier than those who are not are in danger of both oversimplifying and overstating reality. For example, a 2012 meta-analysis of studies measuring the long-term effects of life events for adult well-being, found that after a short-lived “honeymoon period,” those who marry generally settle back to their premarital level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction.⁴⁶ Other contextual factors such as age, race,

⁴²*Clueless*, directed by Amy Heckerling (Hollywood, CA: Paramount Pictures, 1995).

⁴³Wendy L. Morris et al., “Singlism—Another Problem that has No Name: Prejudice, Stereotypes and Discrimination Against Singles,” in *The Psychology of Modern Prejudice*, ed. M. A. Morrison and T. G. Morrison (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2008). See also, DePaulo and Morris, “In Society.”

⁴⁴Lisa Arnold and Christina Campbell, “The High Price of Being Single in America,” *The Atlantic*, January 15, 2013, www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2013/01/the-high-price-of-being-single-in-america/267043/.

⁴⁵For example, see Greitemeyer, “Stereotypes.”

⁴⁶Maike Luhmann et al., “Subjective Well-Being and Adaptation to Life Events: A Meta-Analysis on Differences Between Cognitive and Affective Well-Being,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 102, no. 3 (2012): 15.

geography, education, and income also further complicate the intricate matrix of cause and effect between marriage, singleness, health, wealth, and well-being. But perhaps the most significant factor which is often overlooked in generalizations about the comparative satisfaction that marriage brings, is that it tends to be *happy* marriages and partnerships that allow those involved, and those looking on, to rate them quite so highly.

Despite these qualifying and corrective findings, the pervasive perception of coupled individuals as being happier, healthier, and better off continues to persist within the contemporary social consciousness. Being regarded as socially abnormative, failing to attain authentic maturity, existentially incomplete, and stereotypically sad and afflicted serves to heighten the single person's sense of their *visibility* within society. They are ever reminded that they exist as the abject other. And yet, their marginality often simultaneously amplifies their sense of being *invisible* within that very same society. They appear to themselves, and to others, as being little more than outsiders peering wistfully in. This simultaneously stigmatized visibility and isolating invisibility is poignantly expressed by Donna Ward in the opening pages of her memoir, *She I Dare Not Name: A Spinster's Meditation on Life*: "The gates have closed. I am beyond the balance of intimacy and solitude and deep, deep in the territory of she I dare not name. I am a spinster. I stand in grief and loneliness, the fractured paragraphs of a discontinued narrative. . . . Wrapped in the isolation of a foreigner, the enormity of my solitude is incomprehensible to others."⁴⁷

Ward laments that her grief is frequently "translated as ingratitude for the solitude that everyone desires. [But] I am not ungrateful. I am ill equipped and want to talk about it, *find a way through it*."⁴⁸ While many of her unmarried readers would strongly resonate with Ward's longing, there are others who would express dissatisfaction with her goal to simply "find a way through." For such individuals, merely surviving singleness is far too meager an objective. They long to thrive in their singleness and in doing so to move that form of life, and themselves with it, from the margins of society into its very middle. Such a centripetal momentum is undertaken through a repertoire of

⁴⁷Donna Ward, *She I Dare Not Name: A Spinster's Meditations on Life* (Crows Nest, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2020), 5.

⁴⁸Ward, *Dare Not Name*, 5; emphasis added.

counternarratives which typically posit a sense of empowerment and freedom implicit to singleness. An example of this is evidenced in a 2015 *New York Magazine* article titled “The Unexpected, Exhilarating Freedom of Being Single at 41”:

I am now awash in a freedom I did not anticipate and I feel great, which at times has been unnerving. Am I supposed to feel this great? I possess none of the traditionally recognized keys to happiness, no husband, no children. I am alone, a state which I am supposed to have spent my life trying to avoid. . . . But it also feels like I’ve discovered some sort of secret—like, *Oh my god, you guys, it’s so great over here and no one wants you to know about it.*⁴⁹

And yet even as such offsetting narrativational efforts enjoy some limited success, they continue to make little reforming headway among those outside the unmarried demographic itself. That is to say, the perception of singleness as broadly deficient continues to dominate contemporary Western cultural discourse.

From early modern Europe through to the contemporary West of today, the single person—and particularly the single woman—has been variously depicted as “an old maid, a spinster, an androgyne, a rebel, a marriage resister, sad, mad or bad, embittered, sexless, surplus, celibate, virtuous, a menace, homosexual, a bachelor woman, or an independent woman.”⁵⁰ Despite their being a sizable percentage of the population, secular Western societies have consistently typecast the unmarried person as “the other.”

And yet, so too has the church. In turning from singleness in society to focus on singleness within the church, I hope to demonstrate the sense in which the corresponding otherness of both secular and sacred singleness is no mere matter of coincidence or happenstance.

⁴⁹Glynnis MacNicol, “The Unexpected, Exhilarating Freedom of Being Single at 41,” *New York Magazine*, November 13, 2015, www.nymag.com/thecut/2015/11/unexpected-freedom-of-being-single-at-41.html; emphasis original. For an extended counternarrational argument see Traister, *Single Ladies*. Some significant pop-culture examples are furnished by Paris Lees, “Emma Watson On Being Happily ‘Self-Partnered’ At 30,” *British Vogue*, April 15, 2020, www.vogue.co.uk/news/article/emma-watson-on-fame-activism-little-women; Jackie Willis, “Lady Gaga Gets a Valentine’s Day Proposal—But It’s Not What You Think,” *ET Online*, February 14, 2020, www.etonline.com/lady-gaga-gets-a-valentines-day-proposal-but-its-not-what-you-think-141532.

⁵⁰Anne Byrne, “Single Women in Ireland: A Re-Examination of the Sociological Evidence,” in *Women on Their Own: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Being Single*, ed. Rudolph M. Bell and Virginia Yans (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 35.

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