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**What Every Girl Dreams Of:
A Cultural History of the Sacred in American White Weddings, 1840-1970**

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Abstract

What Every Girl Dreams Of: A Cultural History of the Sacred in American White Weddings, 1840-1970
By Catherine E. Shrout

In the mid-nineteenth century, middle-class Americans began celebrating marriages with a set of rituals that were sentimental, female-centered, and expensive: the “white wedding.” The white wedding became understood to be a marriage conducted in a formal style, with some degree of decorum and pageantry, in which the bride was distinctively costumed in white.

This dissertation, a cultural history of the white wedding from 1840 until 1970, demonstrates how the ritual offered middle-class Anglo-American women sacred experiences. Drawing upon diaries, advice books, advertisements, novels, church materials, films, photographs and material artifacts, the dissertation uses a cultural studies approach to clarify how the experience of what was sacred about a wedding changed over time, how weddings became more symbolically central within American Christianity as marriage was perceived as being under siege, how twentieth-century marketers drew upon sacred associations with the wedding day to appeal to women, and how churches and the marketplace accordingly interacted and shaped wedding practices.

The white wedding has been viewed as a family ritual ordaining nineteenth-century “priestesses of the home;” as a performance that raised questions about its own authenticity; as a serious Christian rite which, if understood properly, prevented divorce; and as a thrilling opportunity to enact the story of Cinderella. As it became a more elaborate religious practice, it also developed into a ritualization of women’s consumer agency, a conscious and unconscious recognition of the marketplace’s transformative power. This dissertation views wedding practices as sacred practices, placing attitudes towards white weddings in an account of the history of American Christianity, and, in doing so, examines one way how consumer culture in the United States has competed with, fed upon and sustained American religious experiences.

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Courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society, WHS Image ID 29432.

CHAPTER ONE: Introduction: Looking for the sacred in American wedding practices

The world, in truth, is a wedding.

-- Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, 1959

Growing exasperated with the mounting expense associated with each step of planning his daughter's wedding, the title character of the 1950 film *Father of the Bride*, Stanley Banks (Spencer Tracy), complained to his wife: "We have always lived simply, within our means. And now what are we going to do? Put on a big show? Put on a big flashy show?" His wife, Ellie (Joan Bennett), responded with an urgent, sentimental appeal: "Oh Stanley, I don't know how to explain. But a wedding – a church wedding – it's what every girl dreams of! A bridal dress, orange blossoms, the music ... it's something lovely for her to remember all of her life. It's something for us to remember, too." Her argument ultimately prevailed. This film reflected the extent to which, by 1950, the church wedding – "the big flashy show" – had become the established ritual through which to mark the beginning of a marriage for white, middle-class Americans.¹

In the middle of the nineteenth century, a growing number of middle-class Americans began their marriages with a set of rituals that were elaborate, sentimental, female-centered, and expensive: the "white wedding." The white wedding became understood to be a marriage conducted in a formal style, with some degree of decorum, pageantry and extravagance, in which the bride was distinctively costumed in white. In the twentieth century, with the development of a wedding industry intent on popularizing particular consumer behaviors, the white wedding became a taken-for-granted rite, a part of mass culture akin to giving gifts at Christmas, or celebrating birthdays with a cake and candles. Over the course of a century, the American wedding came to involve a shifting but

¹Vincente Minnelli, "Father of the Bride," (U.S.A.: Warner Home Video, 1950).

widely shared set of practices, symbols and meanings, which held some significance for everyone, but for women in particular.

This dissertation tells a story based on the marriages of the past, but has implications for understanding contemporary Western wedding practices as well. Today the wedding is the most important formal rite of passage in the American life course.² One indication of this importance is that it is big business. Recent estimates place the cost of the average American wedding at about \$27,000, or roughly half the average annual household income for the United States.³ In her history of the twentieth-century wedding industry, Vicki Howard notes that businesses involved in throwing elaborate weddings (everything from dressmakers to limousine services to wedding consultants to honeymoon providers) today constitute a \$70 billion industry.⁴ Others make the case for the importance of weddings by pointing to the remarkable frequency in which they appear in cultural representation. On television, as Cele Otnes and Elizabeth Pleck note in the introduction of *Cinderella Dreams* (2003), reality-style programming has centered on the process of planning a wedding,⁵ offbeat weddings,⁶ weddings gone horribly awry,⁷ and around the giveaway

² Ronald L. Grimes, *Deeply into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage*, ed. Ronald L. and Robbie Davis-Floyd Grimes, *Life Passages* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 152; Cele Otnes and Elizabeth Hafkin Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams : The Allure of the Lavish Wedding, Life Passages 2* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 5; John R. Gillis, *For Better, for Worse : British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 150.

³ Patricia Cohen, "Love, Honor, Cherish and Buy," *New York Times*, May 9, 2007 2007.

⁴ Vicki Howard, *Brides Inc. American Weddings and the Business of Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 1. Howard bases her numbers on the wedding industry's own estimates. For an example of this, see: <http://www.entrepreneur.com/startupbusiness/businessideas/startupkits/article41348.html>.

⁵ Although some 1950s television programming focused on wedding planning, the recent pioneer in this genre seems to be "A Wedding Story" on The Learning Channel, which debuted in 1997 and has earned some of the network's highest ratings. In a *cinema verité* fashion, it documented the wedding preparation and execution of one couple per episode. See *Ibid.*, 2. By 2010, there were many televised variations on this theme. Two examples: "Whose Wedding is It, Anyway?" (2003) on the Style Network follows wedding preparations from the perspective of the wedding consultant, and "Buff Brides" on Discovery Health specifically looks at brides losing weight and getting fit for the big day.

“dream” wedding, to take a few examples.⁸ Since 1890, there have been more than 350 films with “wedding” or “bride” in their titles,⁹ and in recent years, comedies about weddings have become a separate cinematic genre, with films like *Bride Wars* (2009), *The Wedding Crashers* (2005), *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (2002), and *The Wedding Singer* (1998) achieving notable commercial success. (*The Wedding Singer* also went on to become, in 2006, a successful Broadway musical.) Considerable media attention is given to the weddings of celebrities, and the wedding scene continues to function structurally as a happy ending for popular films, books and television series. Scholars have also, albeit less often, looked to the articulations of individual brides and grooms about the importance of their wedding practices, using ethnographic work and interviews as evidence of how large the lavish wedding looms in Western culture.¹⁰

By these measures and others, we know that contemporary weddings are a big deal. Precisely why they are such a big deal, especially for women, is a question that seems to defy easy explanation.¹¹ For much of the twentieth century, scholars were uninterested in the subject. Western weddings, even as they became more expensive and elaborate, were rituals

⁶ One example: on “My Big Redneck Wedding (2008) on Country Music Television, brides and grooms were featured who had particularly “redneck” weddings – e.g. roast squirrel as reception dishes, beer cans as centerpieces, and so forth.

⁷ For example, “Bridezillas” (2003) on the WE Network, which documents for comic effect the planning of a wedding with a bride who is portrayed as overbearing, self-centered and unreasonable, or “The Real Wedding Crashers” (2007) on NBC, a reality show in which real weddings were “crashed” by actors playing pranks.

⁸ See Cele Otnes and Elizabeth Hafkin Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams : The Allure of the Lavish Wedding, Life Passages 2* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 1-2. “Dream” weddings, often given away as a contest to deserving brides and grooms, have been featured on “Good Morning America,” “The Today Show” and “Live with Regis and Kelly,” to name a few. Over the course of several episodes viewers are welcomed into the process of selecting the bride’s perfect dress, flowers, food, etc. The wedding is then featured on the air.

⁹ Chrys Ingraham, *White Weddings : Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 177-83. in Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams : The Allure of the Lavish Wedding*, 2.

¹⁰ Sharon Boden, *Consumerism, Romance, and the Wedding Experience* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). Tina Lowrey and Cele Otnes, “Construction of a Meaningful Wedding: Differences between the Priorities of Brides and Grooms,” in *Gender and Consumer Behavior*, ed. J. Costa (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1994).

largely taken for granted, and until the 1990s, few found white weddings a fruitful area of study.¹² Sociologists were generally more interested in studying the institution of marriage than its initiatory rite. Although anthropologists of the nineteenth century were interested in the subject (especially Edward Westermarck, who discussed modern weddings in a well-received history of human marriage in 1891), twentieth-century anthropologists tended to turn their attention to non-Western weddings or weddings of the distant past.¹³ Historians paid weddings relatively more attention and looked at the wedding for insight about attitudes towards family and coupling patterns. Work from historians like John Gillis and Ellen Rothman focused on weddings in this context of the history of marriage and courtship, and this work is drawn upon often in the dissertation that follows.

Since the 1990s, more attention has turned to the white wedding and specifically why it has remained such a visible and expensive American rite of passage, even when the expansion of career opportunities for women might suggest that marriage would become less essential. Some historians, like Vicki Howard, have emphasized the role of the commercial wedding industry, which coalesced in the early- and mid-twentieth century, in shaping and creating wedding practices that were dependent upon consumption.¹⁴ Others,

¹² One reason for this relative lack of interest in wedding rituals was likely their association with women and a perception of them as women's practices. Since the 1970s, historians and social scientists influenced by feminist scholarship have taken women's histories and lived experiences more seriously as an object of inquiry, and this resulted in more work on weddings in the 1980s and 1990s. This project is clearly indebted to the legacy of feminist scholarship in both American studies and American religious history.

¹³ Edward Westermarck, *The History of Human Marriage* (London, : Macmillan & Co., 1903). Mary Douglas, in a 1974 lecture, did discuss the symbolism of the tiered wedding cake at length, noting that an ethnographer from Mars might have a hard time determining what was important about a wedding: the marriage or the cake itself. See Mary Douglas, "Food as an Art Form," in *In the Active Voice* (London ; Boston: Routledge & K. Paul, 1982), 105.

¹⁴ Other recent work that has focused on the role of the wedding industry includes journalist Rebecca Mead's critical treatment of the contemporary wedding industry and historian Katherine Jellison's account of how twentieth century advertisers helped to reshape the sentimental white wedding into a postsentimental, female-centered ritual. See Rebecca Mead, *One Perfect Day : The Selling of the American Wedding* (New York: Penguin Press, 2007). and Katherine Jellison, *It's Our Day: America's Love Affair*

like the historian John Gillis, have stressed that the wedding becomes more prominent at moments in history when it is most needed as a ritual: when the institution of heterosexual marriage is perceived as threatened or in flux.¹⁵ In a materialist version of this kind of argument, sociologist Chrys Ingraham makes the case that the Western wedding is primarily a mechanism for reinscribing heterosexuality and whiteness. Thus in the twentieth century, a time when “patriarchal monogamous heterosexuality” is in crisis, the wedding becomes more elaborate as a way of ensuring unequal power relations. Ingraham sees the emphasis on the wedding day as an example of “fairy tales and romance, e.g. love, sports and religion,” – ideology that keeps us from facing the “real conditions of existence.”¹⁶

Ingraham’s argument is not the first to center on the theme that the white wedding is a too-expensive ritual of distracting smoke and mirrors and stands in a long line of critiques of lavish weddings as inauthentic celebrations of vanity. Anglo-American white weddings are performances; this is, perhaps, their most defining characteristic. It is the sense of self-conscious performance – the idea of “putting on a show” for others – that is both central to their appeal and most objectionable for their critics. For those of the past and present who have daydreamed about them, the wedding represents a woman’s moment to align herself with all sorts of images of feminine power and divinity, to effect a mood upon her audience, to leave an impression about herself and her family that will last for years to come, to feel transformed. For those who have complained about their excesses, the wedding is an

with the *White Wedding, 1945-2005*, ed. Karal Ann Marling and Erika Doss, *Cultureamerica* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2008).

¹⁵John R. Gillis, *For Better, for Worse : British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 7.

¹⁶Ingraham, *White Weddings : Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture*, 161. Others have critiqued the lavish wedding on feminist grounds as a widely legitimated mechanism for providing material benefits, such as gifts, solely to women who marry. See Jaclyn Geller’s popularly-written 2001 *Here Comes the Bride: Women, Weddings and the Marriage Mystique*, Jaclyn Geller, *Here Comes the Bride : Women, Weddings, and the Marriage Mystique* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2001), Ingraham, *White Weddings : Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture*, 161.

occasion of posturing and artifice, of inauthenticity and conspicuous consumption. Whether they were valorized or criticized, the historical record indicates that from the 1840s until the 1960s, the middle-class wedding became a progressively more elaborate performance, involving more spending, more practices and more religious legitimation.

What follows in this dissertation is a history of the white wedding from 1840 until 1970 understood in religious terms, with special emphasis on the role of religious practice. The focus here is to demonstrate how the white wedding offered middle-class Anglo-American women a distinctively sacred experience, how what the experience of what was sacred about a wedding changed over time, and how churches and the marketplace interacted and shaped wedding practices in the period under study.¹⁷ The wedding itself is examined as a ritual that enacted, in self-consciously theatrical ways, certain shared white upper-middle class understandings about female experience, about what women were and what they ought to be. The wedding day could offer the bride the promise of a joyful transformation – into someone better, wiser, more beautiful, more loved and more powerful – and the promise of the everlasting memory of this transformation. In a little over a century, both the practices and the experiences of transformation associated with the white wedding became increasingly elaborate in culturally distinctive ways. In this dissertation, I argue that the white wedding became more sacred as it became more elaborate and as greater numbers of women of diverse ethnic, racial and class backgrounds, due to economic changes in the twentieth century, came to accept it as an ideal.

Although the wedding has attracted more scholarly attention since the 1990s, scholars have not fully provided a history of the wedding that takes seriously its relationship not simply to family, marriage and the marketplace, but also to changes in institutional

religion.¹⁸ Indeed, Western weddings have infrequently been examined by historians as religious – and specifically Christian – rituals, which they almost always formally have been in England and in the United States. Within the study of religion, the approaches to Western, Christian weddings have been fairly narrow: sustained treatment of weddings has typically been either in histories of liturgy or in practically-oriented source books for pastors or for brides and grooms.¹⁹

Yet some scholars have identified something sacred about the white wedding, even when they have not linked this experience to institutional religion. Historians and scholars of consumer culture Cele Otnes and Elizabeth Pleck set out to explore the allure of the white wedding through historiography, interviews and media analysis in 2003's *Cinderella Dreams* and argue that most scholars have missed the crucial aspect of the wedding's appeal: that human beings "want to experience magic in their lives." Otnes and Pleck offer four reasons why weddings have become so prominent in culture. Weddings

(1) 'marry' the tenets of both consumer culture and romantic love; (2) offer magical transformation; (3) provide memories of a sacred and singular event; and (4) legitimate lavish consumption through the 'ethic of perfection' – or the standard that includes the desire for both flawless beauty and a perfect performance – as well as an appreciation and recognition of the occasion by both participants and guests.²⁰

¹⁹ For the first approach, see Paul F. Bradshaw, *The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (London: SCM Press, 2002), Kenneth Stevenson, "Marriage," in *The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. Paul F. Bradshaw (London: SCM Press, 2002), Kenneth Stevenson, *Nuptial Blessing: A Study of Christian Marriage Rites, Alcuin Club Collections No. 64* (London: Alcuin Club/SPCK, 1982), Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, "'Till Death Us Do Part': The Rites of Marriage and Burial Prepared by John Wesley and Their Development in the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1784-1939" (1992). For the second, Sidney F. Batts, *The Protestant Wedding Sourcebook: A Complete Guide for Developing Your Own Service*, 1st ed. (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), Susan K. Hedahl, *Preaching the Wedding Sermon* (St. Louis, Mo.: Chalice Press, 1999), Jim Henry, *The Pastor's Wedding Manual* (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1985), Andrew MacBeth, *Dearly Beloved: Navigating Your Church Wedding* (New York: Seabury Books, 2007), Liam Swords, *Marriage Homilies* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985).

²⁰ Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams: The Allure of the Lavish Wedding*, 8-9.

Otnes and Pleck use religious language to describe this set of appeals – especially to describe how participants view the possibility for transformation during a wedding. In a wedding, they argue, “the ritual ceremony is laden with artifacts that make people feel truly changed (even if only for a short while), and the empirical end is the creation of a paradise on earth.”²¹ Weddings can have “magic,” and this magic seems to be the potential to transport people “out of everyday space and time” through a fusion of romantic love and luxury consumption.²² The lavish wedding does not owe its existence to the wedding industry, or to fears of divorce, but to the desire for magical fantasy and romance – “[f]emale desires, longings and illusions ... as old as the folktale of Cinderella.” In Otnes and Pleck’s account, the wedding became more elaborate as commercial forces rose up to meet these desires.²³ In their view, wedding practices of the future will likely be ever more elaborate, as well more inclusive: same-sex weddings being just as potentially effective at providing “magic.”

My task here is twofold: to take seriously what Otnes and Pleck – as well as countless wedding-themed advertisements of the past and present – call the “magic” of weddings but also to historicize and contextualize this “magic” as an evolving sacred experience, a form of American religious culture that has relationships to institutional religion, to economic forces in the marketplace, and to larger cultural trends of the period. This dissertation views wedding practices as religious practices, placing attitudes towards white weddings in an account of the history of American Christianity, and, in doing so, examines one way how consumer culture in the United States has competed with, fed upon and sustained American religious experiences.

²¹ Ibid., 13.

²² Ibid., 13.

²³ Ibid., 54.

The precise time frame of this study is 1840 until 1970, which follows the period of the ascendancy and popularity of the sentimental white wedding. I borrow the notion of the “sentimental occasion” from the work of Elizabeth Pleck to indicate a particular historical form of Western ritual: a family-related practice, usually organized by women, “that centered around consumerism and a display of status and wealth to celebrate home and family.”²⁴ Pleck uses the term to describe a style of celebration and commemoration with origins in the early-to-mid-19th century; birthdays, Christmas, Thanksgiving, and funerals also fall under this category. The celebration of sentimental occasions displaced pre-nineteenth century, carnivalesque ways of marking holidays and events – celebrations that emphasized community over family, took place outdoors, and paid less attention to the specifics of ritual form.²⁵ Victorian sensibilities emerging in the middle of the nineteenth century understood these older ritual forms as raucous and vulgar.

Sentimental occasions took place in the home or church, emphasized the crucial importance of the family and children, involved a certain level of decorum, rules and etiquette, and required particular items that were more often purchased than made specially for the event. But Pleck identifies a shift in practice by the 1960s and 1970s and a new set of emphases in family rituals beginning to emerge. This third style of ritual is the “postsentimental” occasion, which was popularly understood as a reaction to the excesses of the past. Postsentimental occasions were more likely to celebrate individualism, ethnic identity and distinctive family practices. Americans remade and adapted ritual forms to match changing sensibilities, and, as family forms changed in the late twentieth century, many reinvented – but did not throw out – the manner in which they celebrated holidays,

²⁴ Elizabeth Hafkin Pleck, *Celebrating the Family : Ethnicity, Consumer Culture, and Family Rituals* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 1.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

funerals and weddings. Pleck argues that the boundary between the practice of sentimental and postsentimental rituals was fluid, but in this dissertation, the year 1970 serves as an end marker to sentimental weddings as the dominant, largely-unquestioned cultural practice. This is not to imply that postsentimental occasions, or weddings since 1970, carry any less sacred weight in American culture; in fact, the opposite will be suggested in the concluding chapter. But of interest here is the way the sentimental white wedding rose to ubiquitous cultural prominence and particularly how its power to effect meaning and orientation for women coincided with the rise of a multi-billion dollar wedding industry.

About the sacred, consumer culture, and women

In describing wedding rituals as a way of lifting participants “out of everyday space and time,” Otnes and Pleck invoke multiple definitions of religion from anthropology and history of religions – definitions that basically frame religion as that which allows participants to transcend the ordinary and mundane. In the following history of wedding practices, the “sacred” is similarly understood as relating to experiences of transcendence, but also more. As Talal Asad, Catherine Albanese and others have observed, reducing religion to one definitive mark or characteristic is an elusive – and perhaps destructively misleading – project. Here religion is understood in a broad, fluid and messy way, as involving a diverse range “of social phenomena that provide people with order, meaning and purpose.” Gary Laderman has associated religious life with those activities that tend to revolve around a particular set of questions, such as:

What gives life meaning to individuals? Why is there life, as well as death and suffering? How do we live the good life, find happiness, purpose and fulfillment? Where can we locate truth, or some kind of ultimate source of values and morality that is worth our spiritual and material investments? Who deserves our friendship and support and who is the enemy that must be destroyed?

In this understanding of the sacred, human beings might search for the answers to these questions in multiple spheres, not necessarily exclusively in institutional religious settings.²⁶ White weddings have been rituals that straddle spheres, that offer individuals the chance to enact roles that bring them in touch with multiple sources of ultimate meaning – tradition, romantic love, the continuity of the family, the power of ideal femininity – and through performance, can provide a sense of order to personal relationships, to community and to gender identity. In this dissertation, I have taken this cluster-concept approach to the sacred and have paid particular heed when sources drew upon language or imagery that had relationships to wedding days as having special power, significance, otherworldly associations or moral impact.

But if weddings assumed sacred significance not directly associated with traditional religiosity, this does not mean that institutional religious priorities were irrelevant or remained offstage. White weddings mixed institutional priorities coming from churches with cultural developments coming from new forms of consumerism, tied to very specific gender norms and sensibilities. Some scholarly work on weddings assumes that when commercial forces shape weddings, this necessarily diminishes the ritual's Christian significance. But what is interesting (and perhaps ironic) about the story of the white wedding is how often traditional religious symbols and meanings became entangled in other kinds of sacred meanings and symbols associated with the wedding day – and how churches participated in, condoned or remained silent about the elaboration of wedding practices for their own purposes.

²⁶ Gary Laderman, *Sacred Matters: Celebrity Worship, Sexual Ecstasies, the Living Dead, and Other Signs of Religious Life in the United States* (New York: The New Press, 2009), xiv, xv.

The impulse to make ritual is basic to human nature, according to Tom Driver and others, and our rituals both “give stability to our behaviors and ... serve as vehicles of communication.”²⁷ A ritual is understood here as an expressive act that involves an orienting interaction with something that seems beyond the scope of any one individual’s experience. A healing practice might involve interaction with a spirit that requires particular attention. A Catholic Mass might involve the materialization of something all-powerful into a wafer of bread. A meditation ritual might involve the practitioner becoming aware of nothingness, of being, of world-connectedness. Singing the national anthem at a ball game might allow individuals to subsume themselves in the force of the collective, in national identity, in tradition and continuity.²⁸ In rituals that are rites of passage, like weddings, at least some of the participants leave the ritual transformed – having acquired a new status or a new position in the life course.

Imagine a hypothetical white wedding, perhaps a wedding of the 1950s. The bride has selected her full-skirted white gown because it makes her feel like a fairy-tale princess. She has selected a “rainbow” color palette for the wedding (something in vogue in the 1950s

²⁷ Tom Faw Driver, *Liberating Rites : Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1998), 23.

²⁸ Filling out tax forms is an expressive act that involves interaction with something beyond the individual. So is getting dressed in the morning, rather than walking about naked. So is getting your spouse a cup of coffee. Is any social act -- any act that acknowledges that there is something more than the individual – then a ritual? In some respects, I believe that they are. Some theorists, like Erving Goffman, saw rituals in the many interactions of everyday life, viewing them as small performances for others, and completely necessary to maintain a self at all. And those aspects of social life that bring us into contact with the force of the collective do have a ritualistic element; there are aspects of paying taxes or getting dressed or interacting with spouses that are ritualized. They are acts the individual carries out due to her acknowledgment that society is something greater than any one person: in this respect something transcendent. But my interests here are in rituals that go beyond simply acknowledgment of the existence of other humans, and instead in acknowledgments of the existence of something beyond any one human. That “something” could be an all-powerful, benevolent deity in the style of monotheistic Western religions. Or it could be a tricky, childish spirit that resides in your particular village. Or it could be a priest or healing woman, a human being made something greater than human by some superhuman intervention. Or it could be enlightenment. Or it could be the sweep of human history, something that no one person can control or completely affect. Or it could be the United States of America, a bundle of ideologies and practices and institutions beyond any one individual’s control.

and 1960s), and it has taken a great deal of time and effort to make sure each of her bridesmaids has been appropriately costumed in red, orange, yellow, green, blue and indigo. The church is overflowing with flowers in all hues, for which her parents have paid dearly. She and her mother have planned the reception down to each matching cocktail napkin; there will be three types of punch in pink, yellow and green, and matchboxes adorned with rainbows for guests who smoke. On the big day, she walks down the aisle to the well-known bridal march and wears a set of pearls that her grandmother also wore on her wedding day. As she processes, she has a feeling of heightened emotional intensity: she feels all eyes upon her, and knows that everyone is thinking how breathtakingly lovely and sweet she looks, how well everything has been planned, how fortunate the groom is to have won her. In varying degrees, the onlookers share in this feeling of intensity. The bursts of colored ribbons on the side of every pew, the floral scent of the church, the thundering music of the organ, the bright line of bridesmaids standing in front of the altar: all of this detail, much of it marketplace-generated, is helping to sustain the intensity of the moment. The bride and everyone present knows that she is following in a long line of brides who wear white dresses and march to this music, including her grandmother and mother. In this dissertation, her wedding is a sacred ritual because it places the bride in contact with all of these cultural notions greater than the individual – with Western culture’s notion of the beauty and goodness of ideal femininity, with the rapt attention of the collective, with a sense of tradition and continuity. If the participants are practicing Christians and if a Christian clergyman asks for divine blessing during the ceremony – as has been the case in most white weddings – this hypothetical wedding is a ritual in yet another, potentially related sense. Because the wedding is a rite of passage, the bride leaves the wedding transformed, now

occupying a different position in life. The transformation of the wedding day for this hypothetical bride does not require Christian benediction, but it does not exclude it either.

Institutional religious meanings and practices have been and remain integral parts of American wedding days. Today, even accounting for trends for “destination weddings” that take place in Vegas, the beach, or while sky-diving, most American weddings take place in religious centers, are officiated by religious authorities, and/or use ritual forms that are at least derived from, if not explicitly rooted in, religious understandings of marriage.²⁹

Weddings in the mass media overwhelmingly reflect this perspective. In film and on television, weddings typically are depicted as vaguely Christian, take place in a church, involve traditionally worded vows, and include mention of the word “God.”³⁰

Yet describing American weddings as primarily or exclusively rituals of institutional religion is somewhat inaccurate, as anyone who has watched *Runaway Bride*, sauntered

²⁹Web sites offering resources for “atheist weddings” protest this equation of wedding day and religious celebration, in fact. Robin Murray O’Hair notes that while bridal magazines and web sites offer Christians and Jews many resources for planning wedding ceremonies, “[a]theists, apparently, do not exist.” See Robin Murray O’Hair, *Odd Inquiries* (The American Atheist Center, 2006 [cited October 16 2007]); available from <http://www.atheists.org/comingout/weddings/inquiries.html>. National Association of Wedding Ministers, *Wedding Statistics* (2007 [cited April 4 2007]); available from <http://www.aweddingministers.com/wedding/statistics.htm>.

³⁰Erika Engstrom and Beth Semic, “Portrayal of Religion in Reality Tv Programming: Hegemony and the Contemporary American Wedding,” *Journal of Media and Religion* 2, no. 3 (2003), Katy Elizabeth ShROUT, “Religious Meaning and the Hollywood Wedding Ritual,” (Atlanta: Emory University, 2006). An interesting example of a Hollywood wedding that depends upon a religious symbol to be efficacious is the wedding at the climax of the children’s comedy film *Muppets Take Manhattan* (1984). In this film, the presence of a Christian clergyman unexpectedly turns a make-believe wedding into, it is implied, a real one. In the film’s story, the Muppet character Kermit the Frog is playing the role of a groom in a Broadway show, within an elaborate theatrical set constructed to look like a beautiful white church. His longtime paramour Miss Piggy is supposed to be playing the part of his bride. As he steps up to the altar, he is puzzled to face an unfamiliar minister – not a Muppet, but a human actor -- in formal vestments. Surprised, Kermit whispers to Miss Piggy: “I thought Gonzo was playing the minister.” Her guilty laugh in response clues in both Kermit and the audience to the joke: she has arranged for a *real* clergyman – and not an actor – to officiate what was supposed to be a performance of a wedding. Miss Piggy has apparently coerced Kermit into an actual marriage, and the comedy depends upon the audience’s understanding that a *minister* is necessary for a real wedding to take place. The joke might have hinged upon, say, the presence of a justice of the peace, or a marriage certificate (we have no reason to believe the Muppets have a denominational affiliation, after all) but the minister seems to be the clearest, most direct means of transforming this performance into an authentic and efficacious ritual. In fact, there are relatively few examples of justices of the peace officiating wedding ceremonies in Hollywood films.

through a bridal salon, or read a wedding planning guidebook will affirm. In most cultural representation of weddings, Christian practice is visible only in a very non-specific, abstract way.³¹ In the imagery of wedding advertising, the symbols and themes that are most endowed with power are not typically Christian. Crosses, altars, clergy and churches remain ingredients of wedding iconography, but more prominent are white dresses that capture the overwhelming beauty of the bride, loving gazes over candlelight that emphasize the power of romantic love, and diamond rings that last forever, linking women to both past and future. In the twentieth century especially, wedding advertising also represents a celebration of consumption itself – that force capable of turning an everyday woman into a princess clad in white – and an identification of the bride’s authentic self, realized through manufactured dreams and hopes. But all of these intimations of transcendence and transformation coexist, symbiotically, with more traditional religious interpretations of the wedding.

The emergence of a new significance for consumption in American lives, together with the rise of modern marketing and advertising, are key influences in this cultural history. Consumer culture means here the process by and discursive space in which commercial goods, services and commodities are given meanings. Some might be skeptical that the meanings associated with weddings in department store advertisements might be related to the wedding as a sacred practice. As sociologist Colin Campbell has observed, consumption and consumer culture are typically viewed as “the realm in which the worst of human

³¹ Wedding practices from outsider religious traditions – for example, Greek Orthodox wedding practices, “ethnic” Catholic practices, or Hindu wedding practices -- are treated differently in media representations of weddings on television programs like *A Wedding Story* or in Hollywood film. Seeming to borrow a perspective from ethnographic film, these depictions treat specific religious practices and meanings carefully and intently, seeming to view them as what is of real interest about the ceremony. See Engstrom and Semic, "Portrayal of Religion in Reality Tv Programming: Hegemony and the Contemporary American Wedding.", Shrout, "Religious Meaning and the Hollywood Wedding Ritual." This actually represents a recent variation in a long tradition of Anglo-American interest in the wedding practices of other cultures; nineteenth century newspapers and magazines frequently included many travelogue-style accounts of non-Western, non-Christian or non-white weddings.

motives prevail – motives such as pride, greed and envy,” and this has affected scholarly interpretations of consumer behavior,³² particularly when it comes to religion. The encroachment of the marketplace into religious culture has traditionally been interpreted as a sign of secularization, or at very least a dilution of the authenticity and potency of what is considered to be pure religion.³³

But since the 1990s, those who study American religious history and culture have repeatedly offered evidence that such assumptions do not necessarily reflect the reality of lived religion in the United States.³⁴ In his cultural history of American holiday celebrations, Leigh Schmidt tells a story that parallels the history of white weddings in many ways. In Schmidt’s analysis, entrepreneurs and department stores of the early twentieth century adapted and repackaged particular religious symbols and practices for market purposes, and the line between Christianity and commerce became blurred and confused. For its part, institutional Christianity had a complex, ambivalent relationship with the commercialization of holidays. Some nineteenth-century Christian voices would argue that holidays like

³² Colin Campbell, "Consuming Goods and the Good of Consuming," in *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*, ed. Lawrence B. Glickman (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), 20.

³³ For example, conservative Episcopalian Roberto Rivera, writing in *Touchstone* magazine, argues that “our mania with expensive and lavish weddings is inversely proportionate to our appreciation and regard for the theological and moral significance of the event. (White Vera Wang wedding gowns worn by brides who have lived with the groom for two years, anyone?)” This has been a common enough assumption in the past century, but the argument of this dissertation suggests that in the long term the reverse was true: that it is more accurate to see the religious/moral significance of the wedding as rising in tandem with the rise in the ritual’s expense and lavishness. The association of the whiteness of the bridal gown and virginity, which Rivera links to “theological and moral significance,” has its roots more in Victorian fashion than in institutional religion. See Roberto Rivera, "The Trouble with Weddings," *Touchstone Magazine: A Journal of Mere Christianity*, May 2003.

³⁴See Judith M. Buddenbaum, "Social Science and the Study of Media and Religion: Going Forward by Looking Backward," *Journal of Media and Religion* 1, no. 1 (2002)., N.J. Demerath et al., eds., *Sacred Companies: Organizational Aspects of Religion and Religious Aspects of Organizations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998)., Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity : Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995)., R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). R. Laurence Moore, *Touchdown Jesus: The Mixing of Sacred and Secular in American History* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003). Bruce David Forbes and Jeffrey H. Mahan, eds., *Religion and Popular Culture in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

Christmas had become too tightly associated with “the jingle of gilded trinkets,” as an observer in the magazine *Ladies' Repository* put it. (In fact, the same writer worried that weddings were only associated with presents, too.)³⁵ On the other hand, early twentieth century department stores put up Easter and Christmas decorations that carefully replicated the interiors of Christian churches and offered shoppers hymn sing-a-longs with pipe organ accompaniment. Schmidt argues this replication was not usually seen as inappropriate by either storeowners or consumers; indeed, the stores “accorded Christianity considerable cultural authority during the holidays,” and some religious voices actively encouraged this “consecration of the marketplace.”³⁶ In Schmidt’s account, as in this cultural history of weddings, commercial meanings can react with and even amplify Christian significance.

Furthermore, there is reason to suspect that consumer practices have been something particularly influential in the religious lives of women, who have, after all, been consistently both the primary consumers and religious participants in American families. Indeed, women have been the shoppers, planners, decorators, and bakers behind holidays, white weddings and most other family rituals, and they have historically been the ones most likely to explain to children why such rituals are important.³⁷ In this study, it is also suggested that the commercialization of weddings was always associated with women, and that critiques of wedding extravagance were often, although not exclusively, articulated by men.

In textbooks on American religion, chapters on the twentieth century tend to focus on how churches and other religious institutions reacted to and played parts within social

³⁵Mrs. C.A. Halpert, "Festivals and Presents," *Ladies' Repository*, January-June 1871. in Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 182-83.

³⁶Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays*, 199, 62, 209, 36-39.

³⁷Pleck, *Celebrating the Family : Ethnicity, Consumer Culture, and Family Rituals*, 15, Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays*, 10.

movements such as civil rights, feminism, pacifism and the rise of a new conservatism.³⁸ Chapters on women and American religion turn, in the twentieth century, on female leadership in social movements, as well as to feminist theology and denominational controversies over ordaining women.³⁹ It is less common for textbooks to treat the creation of a mass consumer culture in the twentieth century as something that specially affected religious life, and specifically women's religious lives, in this period – although presumably few would dispute that it did. It will be argued here that a new mass culture transformed how communities and individuals practiced and organized the rite of passage that led to marriage – and that it also changed the nature of what was understood as sacred about the wedding ritual.

It can be somewhat unsettling to speak of how women have used practices fostered by the marketplace to stake out sacred meaning and to communicate a sense of power. It might be tempting to dismiss white gowns and expensive flowers as distraction from more substantive topics: the role women should play in church communities, perhaps, or the theological significance of marriage. Or more appealing, perhaps, to study cases in which women have resisted the excesses of consumer culture, and how their religious lives empowered them to do so. But these perspectives miss how a great deal of religion has been lived and practiced by women in their everyday lives. In studying women's religious devotionalism, Robert Orsi describes feeling guilty about studying women who were passive and religiously “immature,” turning to devotion to saints rather than more serious religious

³⁸ See, for example: Edwin S. Gaustad and Leigh Eric Schmidt, *The Religious History of America*, Rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), 207-428., Sydney E. Ahlstrom and David D. Hall, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 731-1097., Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1992), 363-554..

³⁹ Ann Braude, Jon Butler, and Harry S. Stout, *Women and American Religion, Religion in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 83-134.

pursuits. He recalls asking himself, “[C]ouldn’t I find a mature, contemplative or mystical woman political activist leading a campaign of social justice to study?” But the challenge in studying women’s religion, Orsi concludes, is not to feel compelled to imagine it as a series of triumphs and accomplishments, but to view it as something human that engages the realities of everyday life, “to overcome a complex of denials, exclusions, and omissions at the center of our theory and our public religion, and to learn to think across well-established theoretical, psychological, and cultural boundaries.”⁴⁰ In approaching a topic like the importance of the white wedding to women, it is therefore critical to bracket one’s assumptions about when religious practice is authentic and when it is not, about which aspects of a wedding are serious and which are frivolous, and about what entities and authorities can legitimately assign sacred meanings to rituals.⁴¹

One critical theme in this dissertation is that white weddings are stylized performances, and that over time they became more elaborate and self-conscious. As has already been suggested above, for some critics of the white wedding, it was exactly this sense of showiness that put the ritual at odds with sincere religious or emotional experience. This displeasure with theatrical ritual is partially rooted in a longstanding Protestant suspicion of Catholic rites as extravagant and idolatrous, attending too much to outward trappings and failing to address internal transformation and meaning. But anthropologists of religion, particularly those who study non-Western rituals, have long argued that theatrical performance and religious ritual are not neatly separate categories. Victor Turner, for example, famously saw social dramas unfolding in every society – dramas based on the universal sequence of breach, crisis, redress, and reintegration – and viewed ritual (and,

⁴⁰Robert Orsi, "The Gender of Religious Otherness," in *Women and 20th-Century Protestantism Project* (University of Chicago's Gleacher Center: 1999).

sometimes, theatrical performance) as a way of completing this cycle.⁴² Effective performance and ritual exist on a continuum; those cultural forms we consider “performances” can have qualities of ritual, and those we consider “rituals” can have qualities of performance. We might say that in a ritual, participants are *more* likely to be looking for particular results, to feel linked to absent others, to feel that time is set apart, to not be calculating of the effects of their actions on spectators. But these characteristics are hardly universal in religious rituals, including weddings, nor do they necessarily rule out every species of performance.⁴³ As white weddings became more elaborate performances – that is to say, as atmosphere, costuming, staging, music and poetry became more important considerations in planning a wedding – we need not assume they became any less efficacious as religious ritual.

The argument here is that as weddings became more elaborate – or as they began to be commonly understood as involving more planning, more money, more rules, and more associated practices – they also became more culturally important and were assigned more sacred meanings. The phrase “more sacred” is a strange one, seemingly suggesting that the sacred can be quantified. If one sees a sharp dichotomy between the sacred and the profane and views sacred experience as starkly distinct from those parts of life that are merely ordinary and everyday,⁴⁴ then the idea of objects or practices acquiring more or less sacrality might seem incongruous. But the story told in this investigation concerns a practice that had some traditional religious and cultural meaning that over time became valued, legitimated

⁴² See Ronald Grimes’ interesting discussion of Turner and other viewpoints on ritual and performance in Peter Antes, Armin W. Geertz, and R. R. Warne, *New Approaches to the Study of Religion* (Berlin ; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 113-16.

⁴³ Fiona Bowie, *Anthropology of Religion: An Introduction* (Walden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 145-47.

⁴⁴ Jon Butler, "Historiographical Heresy: Catholicism as a Model for American Religious History," in *Belief in History: Innovative Approaches to European and American Religion*, ed. Thomas Kselman (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane : The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959).

and embellished by continually more institutions and voices. In some respects, it is the story of disparate, locally specific wedding practices giving way to a powerful mass market homogenization – of marriage practices becoming rationalized in a Weberian sense.⁴⁵ But where Max Weber saw the process of rationalization as helping to usher in the *disenchantment* of the world, the creation of a ubiquitous and standard ideal white wedding in the nineteenth and twentieth century could be a process of *enchantment*, of strengthening associations with institutional and non-institutional religious meanings.⁴⁶ As more women were participating in the “dream” of a lovely wedding day, and as the dream became more dependent upon buying things, each object associated with the white wedding day – engagement ring, white gown, dress, cake, flowers, gifts, memory books, photographs – began to be endowed with its own particular sentimental meaning, significance and magic. Early in the nineteenth century a wedding cake might be simply a cake baked by relatives to serve to guests, but by the twentieth century it was your *wedding cake*: a special, expensive, widely-understood symbol of your wedding day that was more potent in part because it was so widely understood. Not every wedding object would retain its magic over time (orange blossoms, for instance, were once viewed as objects special to the bride on her wedding day, but no longer have exactly the same connotation today) but the white wedding itself, as an aggregate of objects and

⁴⁶ Weber spoke of “disenchantment of the world” (notably in “Science as a Vocation” and “Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism”) as the tendency of modern selves to be less likely to view the world as animated with mysterious forces and to be less likely to seek recourse through magical means. He thought of this primarily as the waning influence of superstition and institutional religion in the face of more instrumental logics – something escorted in by the Protestant Reformation, which effectively rationalized and systematized the path to salvation. However, Weber did recognize that there were experiences of the irrational and ecstatic in modern life, notably in spheres that offered competing sources of salvation for individuals, such as the sphere of erotic love. More on this in chapter two. Max Weber, “Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions,” in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H.H. and C. Wright Mills Gerth (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism, Routledge Classics* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2001), Max Weber, C. Wright Mills, and Hans Heinrich Gerth, *From Max Weber : Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 129-58. See also Robert Neelly Bellah, “Max Weber and World-Denying Love: A Look at the Historical Sociology of Religion,” in *Humanities Center and Burke Lectureship on Religion and Society* (University of California, San Diego 1997).

practices, is still something so symbolically powerful that it justifies significant expenditure and energy.

Because the interest here is in the sacred meaning of weddings both within and beyond institutional religion, I use the term “white wedding” to refer to a wide-ranging set of practices associated with the wedding day. In other words, the “white wedding” is taken to mean not simply the wedding liturgy (although liturgies are examined here), but also practices like wearing an engagement ring, attending showers, giving and receiving gifts, sending invitations, putting on a wedding dress, buying flowers, attending receptions and honeymoons, and even commemorating the day with memory books, photographs or anniversary parties. At the same time, however, this dissertation is not a history of all of these many practices and, for reasons of clarity and expediency, does not always explicate the origins and development of all associated elements of the wedding – the bachelor party, for example, or the role of flower girls. The focus will remain on how white wedding practices multiplied in modernity, how they depended increasingly on consumption, and how they amplified or refracted both traditional and popular sacred meanings.

A final thought about the relationship between the sacred and the marketplace in American culture: those who are looking for a thoroughgoing condemnation of the influence of the marketplace on American religion will likely be disappointed with what follows. As implied above, the intent is to avoid assuming that popular practices originating in the marketplace are *de facto* tacky, immoral, deluded or oppositional to traditional religiosity. This is not because I view myself as a particular apologist for consumer capitalism, but because my interest is in sacred meaning in a consumer capitalist society, which may not look like how we have been trained to understand “sacred meaning.” In my eyes this approach should not be viewed in opposition to institutional-level critiques of a consumer economy, but

rather as a reminder that popular practices can and do meet real religious needs, and that they can and do provide real meaning and orientation. The meanings of consumer practices are not always merely false ideology, smoke and mirrors that only serve to keep us from seeing the real conditions of existence. Once asked why he uses Karl Marx in his theology, the liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez answered, “Because the people use him.”¹ In the contemporary United States, the people use practices of consumption – and those who are seriously engaged with religious life in the United States ought to grapple with the implications of this.

Methods and organization

In order to understand the white wedding as an experience of the sacred across multiple institutions and in cultural context, I am taking an intentionally broad, multidisciplinary approach towards the subject, depending upon cultural studies, and drawing upon insights and approaches from history, history of religions, sociology, anthropology, liturgical analysis, and visual culture. For primary sources I have drawn widely, but rely most heavily on popular, public discourse that concerns weddings: newspaper and magazine articles, advertisements, advice and etiquette books, fiction and poetry, films, sheet music, as well as various kinds of Christian publications and organizational materials. Whenever possible, an attempt has also been made to account for popular interpretation of these materials and to include the voices of participants in weddings. To do this I have drawn upon diaries, letters, photographs, memory books and other wedding-related artifacts.

The intent has been to study weddings as a loose set of practices, following a recent turn in the study of lived religion towards an emphasis on practice over idea or belief. One ambiguity about the term “practice,” noted by the editors of *Practicing Protestants* (2006), is

that it can have two differing shades of meaning due to its origins in both social theory and constructive theology. Theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu and Catherine Bell emphasize the regulatory and structuring aspects of “practice” and have viewed it as the specific and concrete way that structural power orders lives. Constructive theologians and moral philosophers, on the other hand, have viewed it more hopefully, as a way of cultivating Christian virtues, creating continuity with the past, and transmitting a kind of meaning distinct from meanings found in texts.⁴⁷

The view of practice adopted here is one that attempts to account for impulses from both of these approaches. Practices do create and maintain order and replicate structure, but they also are potentially adapted or remade by those who participate in them. Marketers and industry specialists worked to draw out the sacred meaning of weddings in order to sell a product, and religious authorities anxious about the role of marriage in modernity were indirectly complicit in this, layering institutional meanings upon the wedding rite. However, white wedding practices were not exclusively shaped by either one of these institutions, and the weddings of everyday men and women were probably rarely experienced as either advertisers or religious authorities presented them. In other words, viewing weddings as practices is an attempt to acknowledge more fully the role of both *structure* and *agency* in American religious culture.

That said, this dissertation does place an accent on structural influence (particularly of market and church) and tends to emphasize how women of all backgrounds became enthralled by the “dream” of the white wedding. This was never true of all women, and at every point in the white wedding’s history there were always those who resisted the ritual –

⁴⁷Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh Eric Schmidt, and Mark R. Valeri, *Practicing Protestants : Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630-1965, Lived Religions* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 2, 4-5.

on the grounds that it was too vulgar, too expensive, too hokey, too secular, too steeped in patriarchy, too predictable. Because the interest of the dissertation is largely in the white wedding as an ideal, as it existed as a focus for expectations of sacred experience, the attention here is inevitably weighted towards the discourse about and practices of white, middle- and upper-class Christians, mostly Protestants. The data for this study generally privileges this subset of Americans that wielded disproportionate cultural influence, the assumed primary audience for most American publications, marketers, churches and public discourse. Although the sentimental white wedding did become a more widely shared ideal, much about the dream of the white dress, church processional and lavish reception was specifically tailored to the interests and social location of middle- and upper- class white women of Christian backgrounds – and many publications took this audience utterly for granted. (Indeed, an interesting aspect of the story of white weddings after 1970 – the rise of the postsentimental wedding – is how racial and ethnic particularity began to be co-opted into what had been a hegemonic, very *white* wedding ideal.)⁴⁸

With these limitations in mind, the objective of what follows is to see what happens when the history of the white wedding is viewed as a process of sacralization rather than one of secularization. To emphasize the changes in practices over time, chapters are organized chronologically rather than thematically. **Chapter two** tells the story of the rise and initial popularity of the sentimental white wedding in the middle of the nineteenth century, roughly 1840-1880, and examines the influential symbolism of the weddings of Queen Victoria and her children. This chapter compares the new ritual style to wedding patterns prior to the mid-nineteenth century: a diverse set of religious, regional and cultural practices that tended to emphasize community and the carnivalesque. I then identify some themes with sacred

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Pleck attends specifically to the rituals of non-white and immigrant families, including weddings, in Pleck, *Celebrating the Family : Ethnicity, Consumer Culture, and Family Rituals*.

resonance that emerged as important to the new ritual: the understanding of wives and mothers as diligent “priestesses” of the home, the otherworldly quality given to romantic love, and the orienting power of history, death and memory. The themes laid out in this chapter would continue to be of importance on the white wedding day, although they also took on new emphases and meanings as gender roles changed and a consumer ethos became more influential.

Chapter three argues that the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (or roughly 1880-1920) was a period of special flux and anxiety on the subjects of marriage, romantic love and family. This chapter begins with an exploration of how white weddings were understood by both participants and critics to be a kind of theatrical performance. In fact, in this period, staged recreations of weddings (most often community pageants or performances) became especially fascinating and popular and could even be confused with real weddings. Of significance was that the performativity involved on the wedding day increasingly involved the marketplace. But even as weddings were becoming more elaborate, they depended on the promise of continuity and tradition for legitimacy. Bearing in mind this elaboration and continued commercialization of the wedding, **Chapter four** turns to the question of why Protestant churches in the period 1880-1920 did not protest more vigorously about these changes in the ritual. The lavish wedding, usually taken to be synonymous with “church wedding,” frequently required active participation of both clergy and congregations, but religious critiques of excess on the wedding day were muted and selective. I argue that American churches voiced few objections to the elaborate wedding rite because, in this period, they were preoccupied with how marriages ended and not so much how they began. In the midst of national-level struggles against rising divorce rates and other changes in family life, Christian leaders and organizations were not inclined to object to

formal white wedding practices, which symbolically reaffirmed the binding (and sometimes sacramental) power of marriage, paid heed to tradition, and kept the wedding safely within the walls of the church. To conclude the chapter, I demonstrate how the propriety and moral acceptability of the lavish wedding became more commonly assumed in the period, contrasting the public interpretation of President Grover Cleveland's relatively modest wedding in 1886 to the discourse about the tragedy and glamour of modest "war weddings" during the First World War.

Wedding days of the twentieth century would increasingly be shaped by what would ultimately become a sophisticated, multi-billion dollar wedding industry, as well as by depictions of weddings in the mass media. **Chapter five** begins with a comparison of three depictions of weddings in 1950s Hollywood film and argues that in these depictions and others, mass media and marketers for the wedding industry strengthened, amplified and added to sacred associations with the wedding day. This chapter argues that in the period 1920-1970, the story of Cinderella (especially as told in the 1950 Walt Disney film) emerged to become the central myth associated with the commercial white wedding ritual: a story in which any ordinary girl becomes a princess through the influence of a fairy godmother, a feminine personification of the marketplace. In this period, as the white wedding became mass marketed to national audience, more and more women began to hope for and expect the fairy-tale occasion. I examine here weddings of selected "outsider" communities – specifically African Americans, Jews, Mormons, and those who could not afford a lavish white wedding – and how they resisted but ultimately largely co-opted practices of the commercial mid-century white wedding. **Chapter six** carries forward the examination of the relationship between institutional Christianity and the lavish white wedding begun in chapter four. In the period 1920-1970, churches turned to premarital counseling of brides and

grooms as a promising strategy for strengthening married life and keeping families religiously active. As a result, the church wedding became more important to Christian communities than ever. But while Christian leaders emphasized that weddings ought to be primarily religious occasions, twentieth-century churches also accommodated and even facilitated commercialization – through a tendency of liturgical reform to result in longer, more elaborate wedding liturgies, and also on the congregational level, in the weddings that were often overseen by minister’s wives.

The conclusion, **chapter seven**, looks at some of the lingering questions associated with religiosity and the white wedding. Starting with an examination of wedding practices after 1970, including the persistent appeal of the 1950s heroine Cinderella on the wedding day, it then moves to asking several key questions about the ritual as it is and has been practiced.

As a final note, it is worth observing that white weddings have always been rituals requiring the blessing of multiple institutions and rites that necessarily bridge the public and private. Any given scholarly analysis of the American wedding might involve a discussion of the dynamics of family life, state definitions of marriage, marketing studies, among many other subjects. Certainly all of these topics relate to the wedding, and although my focus may tighten in what follows, the intent is not to reduce the importance of weddings to one area of interest. Nevertheless, my objective is to view the American wedding not simply as sentimental pageant, as market construction, as state-sanctioned beginning of a marriage, as formal liturgy, as meaningful exchange between two people, or as means of social exclusion, but as multilayered sacred practice.

CHAPTER TWO:**The invention of the white wedding: creating priestesses of the home, 1840-1880**

The fair poetic maiden, the seeress, the saint, has passed into that appointed shrine for woman, more holy than cloister, more saintly and pure than church or altar, -- *a Christian home*.

-- Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Minister's Wooing*, 1859

Like burying the dead in ornate caskets or trimming Christmas trees, beginning marriages with decorous white weddings is a practice that comes to us today by way of the Victorians. The church bedecked with flowers and candles, the luxurious white bridal gown, the solemn processional of the bride and her attendants, the cake with swirling white icing, the formal engraved invitation before and sentimental cards of congratulations after: these were by and large practices that were first popularized among urban, middle-class Northeastern Americans starting in the middle third of the nineteenth century. In tandem with their English counterparts, middle-class Americans began to marry in elaborate, stylized, and sentimental ceremonies – ceremonies made possible because of new economic and urban living patterns. American women began to see the wedding as a significant personal and social ritual in their life course, one that involved a fair amount of stage management, preparation and performance.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the transformative experience of participating in a formal white wedding began to change. Older meanings assigned to the rite, especially traditional Protestant meanings, were increasingly eclipsed by a preoccupation with family, romantic love, and the practice of Christianity through these institutions. These changes in the wedding ritual were tightly linked with the emergence of new roles for women, and they increasingly emphasized the centrality of the bride. Weddings became the bride's ritual, celebrating and invoking transcendent themes of particular interest to women. A wedding could allow women to experience and be identified with the sacred, an aspect of the wedding ritual that would remain the same even as roles for women changed significantly

in the twentieth century. In the nineteenth century, weddings became rituals that endowed women with a new role as a priestess of the home – a role that, for nineteenth century Americans, was religiously significant in concrete ways – and that relied upon the power of romantic love and tradition.⁴⁹ But in order to better understand these changes, a brief exploration of Anglo-American weddings before the mid-nineteenth century is necessary.

Wedding practices before 1840

In spring of 1770, a middle-class Massachusetts woman, Elizabeth Porter, was “published” to lawyer Charles Phelps, meaning their intent to marry was announced at the local church. A month later, Porter married him at home in the late afternoon, wearing a “dark brown ducupe” dress (a plain silk garment, which would later be altered and reused for other occasions).⁵⁰ Two family members were her bridesmaids, and approximately forty guests attended. The following day the marriage was celebrated with a dinner, and Phelps reported in her diary that the next week was full of the requisite wedding visits from family and members of the community.⁵¹

While Phelps’ wedding was marked with some special celebration with family and members of the community, her own diary entries on the subject mention the wedding only in a few lines. There was no white dress, no decorated church, no tiered cake, no bridal march, and no honeymoon. Before the middle of the nineteenth century, most Americans did not have this list of associations with the wedding day; in fact, American wedding days

⁴⁹ John R. Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making : Myth, Ritual, and the Quest for Family Values*, 1st ed. (New York: Basic books, 1996), 61-80.

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Pendergast Carlisle, *Earthbound and Heavenbent: Elizabeth Porter Phelps and Life at Forty Acres (1747-1817)* (New York: Scribner, 2004), 56, Elizabeth Porter Phelps, "Diary of Elizabeth Porter Phelps, May, 1770," in *Under a Colonial Roof-Tree: Fireside Chronicles of Early New England*, ed. Arria Sargent Huntington (Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1891), 133.

⁵¹ Carlisle, *Earthbound and Heavenbent: Elizabeth Porter Phelps and Life at Forty Acres (1747-1817)*, 56, Phelps, "Diary of Elizabeth Porter Phelps, May, 1770," 133.

shared very few characteristics in common at all. In a largely agrarian society, most marriages did not take place in churches but were conducted at home – and wedding practices were diverse and variable, largely specific to one’s class, ethnicity, region, and religious tradition.⁵²

Most weddings prior to the nineteenth century did seem to involve a ring, a carryover from a centuries-old practice that predates Christianity.⁵³ Some early Americans would have considered it important to be married in a new bridal dress (of any color), in a church, and with a wedding breakfast immediately following. Others would have found it necessary to have a number of friends and family present for the celebration afterwards, so that the wedding could involve a bit of a “frolick,”⁵⁴ perhaps with some off-color jokes, songs and pranks. It was not unheard of to be married in an entirely informal and pragmatic wedding, without the official presence of a clergyman or justice of the peace – or simply to let cohabitation or pregnancy announce a marriage. (This was more common among slaves and the lower classes, in more sparsely populated areas, and in the South, where both religious and legal authorities tended to be fewer and farther between.⁵⁵) Urban elite practices began to change in the late eighteenth century, but before the 1840s it was not typical for a wedding to involve white dresses, more than one or two bridal attendants, processional music, post-wedding trips or honeymoons, or greeting cards, toasts or speeches. In general, weddings were community occasions that marked the movement of a woman from one household to another.

⁵² Vicki Howard, *Brides Inc. American Weddings and the Business of Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 10-12.

⁵³ Kenneth Stevenson, *Nuptial Blessing : A Study of Christian Marriage Rites, Alcuin Club Collections No. 64* (London: Alcuin Club/SPCK, 1982).

⁵⁴ Drinker, Elizabeth Sandwith, 1735-1807, *Diary of Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker*, April, 1799, in *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, vol. 2. Crane, Elaine Forman, ed.. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1991, pp. 845.

⁵⁵ Howard, *Brides Inc. American Weddings and the Business of Tradition*, 10.; Elizabeth Hafkin Pleck, *Celebrating the Family : Ethnicity, Consumer Culture, and Family Rituals* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 10-15, 209.

None of this is to suggest that early American weddings were not important markers of transition for individuals, for families or for particular communities. They did, particularly for white people of some financial means, represent a notable change of status for men and women, signifying, for example, their new roles as master and mistress of their own household. Such changes in status often invoked transcendent or divine authority, albeit not always in grand and lavish ways. But in a period when transportation and communication were difficult and before the creation of a national marketplace, there were relatively few broadly *shared* weddings practices in the United States, and, accordingly, fewer shared understandings of what, if anything, was sacred about a wedding. Put differently, before widespread industrialization and urbanization, the sacred was defined at the level of the community.

Of course, one important fault line in determining what might be sacred about a new marriage was religious affiliation.⁵⁶ From the twelfth century in England and Wales, the Roman Catholic Church and then the Church of England had a heavy hand in overseeing the ritual that marked the creation of new households,⁵⁷ and indeed, the presence of God during a wedding has been something of importance to virtually all Christians since that time. But in the eighteenth century, there was not one consistent Christian, or even Anglo-American Protestant, view of the wedding rite itself. In fact, the diversity of wedding practices was due in some part to the considerable Protestant ambivalence towards wedding rituals dating back to the Reformation. Roman Catholics considered marriage a sacrament, or a visible ritual expression of God's grace, and would have found it important to marry in a church with a priest or bishop officiating an established formal ritual for weddings. Martin

⁵⁷ John R. Gillis, *For Better, for Worse : British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 18-19.

Luther's statement on the subject summed up a fairly common viewpoint of early Protestants: "Since marriage and the married estate are worldly matters, it behooves us pastors or ministers of the church not to attempt to order or govern anything connected with it, but to permit every city and land to continue its own use and custom[.]"⁵⁸ Weddings, in this view, were not really affairs that Christian clergy ought to involve themselves in unnecessarily, and community customs were permitted to serve as the most visible wedding rituals.

Moreover, many early Americans would have been raised in religious traditions with serious reservations about theatrical ritual in church services altogether, or at least a tendency to deemphasize formality in worship. At the time of the American Revolution, at least sixty percent of American church congregations were affiliated with denominations that claimed a Calvinist heritage, although the exact representation of denominations varied considerably across regions.⁵⁹ The Calvinist attitude toward liturgical ritual was traditionally one of grave suspicion – it reeked of the empty excesses of Catholicism – and as was the case with early Lutherans, weddings were seen as something best left to civil authorities. In New England in the early colonial period, Puritan towns indeed prohibited ministers from officiating at weddings, and magistrates or justices of the peace most often conducted them.⁶⁰ The leaders of denominations most influenced by Calvinism (Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists

⁵⁸ Martin Luther, "The Order of Marriage for Common Pastors, 1529," in *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehman (St. Louis, Mo.: Concordia Fortress Press, 1955), 110-15. quoted in Peter H. Pfatteicher, "Marriage: Lutherans," in *The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. Paul F. Bradshaw (London: SCM Press, 2002), 304.; Stevenson, *Nuptial Blessing: A Study of Christian Marriage Rites*, 133.

⁵⁹ For example, Congregationalism, not surprisingly, was numerically dominant in New England; Baptists were better represented in the middle colonies and in the South. Rodney and Roger Finke Stark, "American Religion in 1776: A Statistical Portrait," *Sociological Analysis* 49, no. 1 (1988): 47, 49.

⁶⁰ Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (New York: Basic Books inc., 1984), 78. Glenda Riley, "Courtship, Marriage, Separation and Divorce," in *Encyclopedia of American Social History*, ed. Mary Kupiec Cayton, Elliot J. Gorn, Peter W. Williams (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993).

and various Reformed traditions) tended to downplay the church wedding, and, as a result, these denominations did not have standard written liturgies of matrimony until later in the nineteenth century. The use of a ring was an especially sore subject. Some Calvinist-influenced leaders viewed the ring as having no scriptural basis and unpleasantly Catholic connotations as something sacramental or superstitious.⁶¹

Early American Episcopalians, probably influenced by low-church sympathies, included the wedding rite in the 1789 *Book of Common Prayer*, but gave it relatively less emphasis than had been traditional in the Church of England. In the first 1549 *Book of Common Prayer*, the wedding had been viewed as a “pastoral office,” requiring the presence of a priest or bishop to pronounce a blessing on the union and to celebrate the Eucharist. By the 1789 American prayer book, the rite was shorter, the Eucharist was omitted, and the rite was framed more as the blessing of a civil union.⁶² Still, Episcopalians popularly tended to hold marriage to be a more formal religious rite and always maintained a regular written liturgy. Wealthy Episcopalians at the beginning of the nineteenth century held large weddings that used the well-known liturgy from the *Book of Common Prayer* (“Dearly beloved, we come together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this company...”), which, although shortened in the 1789 version, was a version of the influential, centuries-old Anglican form.⁶³ Episcopalians were well represented among the upper classes and political leadership of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – eight of the fifteen presidents before Lincoln were at least nominally Episcopalians, for example – so their practices were visible and potentially influential, especially in urban areas. Moreover, for

⁶¹Kenneth Stevenson, "Marriage," in *The New Scm Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. Paul F. Bradshaw (London: SCM Press, 2002), 303.

⁶²Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), 429-430.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 297-310.

many Americans descended from English colonists, the *Book of Common Prayer* and Anglican practice would have been familiar, part of a shared heritage. When no other liturgical options were available – and, in many denominations, they were not – Protestant clergy turned to the language and form of the *Book of Common Prayer* liturgy for weddings.

Methodists and Baptists, whose numbers mushroomed during and after the popular evangelical surge of the early nineteenth century, tended to fall in line with Calvinist aesthetic sensibilities as well as the practical concerns of less-populated areas and were not particularly inclined to formal ritual. Still, early Methodists used John Wesley's 1784 liturgy, which was a reasonably faithful adaptation of the *Book of Common Prayer* – except, for reasons that are not clear, it excluded the traditional use of a ring and the giving away of the bride. (Wesley may have shared in Calvinist worries about the ring's symbolism, or he might have associated the “purchase” of the bride with slavery, which he opposed.⁶⁴)

Yet, even when the wedding itself was deemphasized as an institutional religious rite, few Americans perceived festive weddings as inappropriate. Indulging in a large wedding celebration with food, drink and merriment did not ever seem to have the same morally questionable status for Protestants as other forms of leisure entertainment, such as playing a card game or attending the theater. This acceptance may have been partly because evangelicals, who prided themselves on their conformity to scriptural authority, would have viewed the wedding as a condoned reason for celebration in scripture. The New Testament mentioned weddings on several occasions. In the book of John, for example, the wedding feast at Cana was an occasion for a miracle of hospitality, Christ turning water into wine when the wine provided for guests had run out. Nineteenth century writers referred as well

⁶⁴ Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, "Marriage: Methodists," in *The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. Paul F. Bradshaw (London: SCM Press, 2002), 305; Stevenson, *Nuptial Blessing: A Study of Christian Marriage Rites*, 158.

to the parable of the wedding garment from the Book of Matthew, in which a group of slaves was invited off the street to join a royal wedding celebration, and the king castigated one of them for not wearing attire appropriate to the occasion. This parable, most commonly interpreted as advocating spiritual preparation for death or for the return of Jesus, was invoked by a Quaker woman when a friend died in 1855 when she observed in her journal that the woman was “ready to meet the messenger, with the wedding garment on.”⁶⁵ An early nineteenth-century evangelical clergyman used the biblical image of the church as the bride of Christ when he contrasted the worldly balls of the elite with the marriage festival in heaven. For the celestial marriage festival, he wrote, “for which preparation has long been making,” the bridegroom would be “glorious” and all the guests together, acting as the church, “will constitute the happy bride for whom all this glory is prepared.”⁶⁶ Such appropriation of biblical allusions to weddings suggests that they were seen as legitimate occasions for celebration, even worthy of fine clothing and drink.

And while some religious leaders discouraged elaborate celebration and frivolity, revelry abounded at weddings. Even in seventeenth-century Puritan New England, where churches and clergy helped shape the strict, orthodox cultural ethos, everyday people celebrated weddings in Elizabethan village style, with fatted turkeys and rich desserts as well as dancing, drinking, and raucous folk ceremonies. Such carnivalesque celebrations provoked disapproval from religious leadership, but they were, as David Hall has argued, “culturally legitimate” among lay people in New England towns.⁶⁷ Into the early nineteenth century

⁶⁵ Hunt, Sarah Morey Underwood, *Diary of Sarah Morey Underwood Hunt*, July, 1855 in *Journal of the Life and Religious Labors of Sarah Hunt*, Philadelphia, PA: Friends Book Association, 1855, pp. 262.

⁶⁶Rev. Dr. Buckminster, "The Splendid Wedding," *The Panoplist, and Missionary Magazine*, October 1812, 220-22.

⁶⁷ David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment : Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Knopf, 1989), 210.

Americans continued to celebrate weddings with popular rites, not connected to or especially under the domain of religious authority. In 1799, for example, a pious Quaker couple offered to give non-Quaker friends a wedding supper if they were willing to do it “in a sober way.” The couple turned them down, apparently because “a wedding without a frolick would be no weding” [sic].⁶⁸ A comic poem often reprinted in American newspapers in 1824 also hinted at common popular practices:

Did you ever go to a wedding?
 What a darn'd sight o'bussing it takes;
 Then your mouth it is hot as pudding,
 They put so much spice in their cakes.⁶⁹

The homespun Yankee narrator described an abundance of bussing (or kissing) and the serving of wedding cakes, which were dark and heavily spiced, probably similar to contemporary fruitcake. Both the cake and the atmosphere of carnival – with loud and aggressive play, including sexual innuendo – are features long associated with popular English weddings, dating back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.⁷⁰ Early Americans may have harbored certain Protestant suspicions of high-church ritual, but they continued to indulge in popular, informal celebrations that stressed community ties and playful subversion of authority.

In general, then, many American Protestant leaders, eager to differentiate their position from the traditional Catholic perspective on ritual and sacrament, were hesitant to make too big of a fuss over wedding rites – and yet the more formal Church of England wedding liturgy had its admirers, scripture provided a precedent for celebrating weddings, and raucous popular practices celebrated community ties in most regions. In any case, most

⁶⁸ Drinker, Elizabeth Sandwith, 1735-1807, *Diary of Elizabeth Sandwith Drinker*, April, 1799, in *The Diary of Elizabeth Drinker*, vol. 2. Crane, Elaine Forman, ed.. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1991, pp. 845.

⁶⁹ Anonymous, "Jonathan's Visit to a Wedding," *Augusta Chronicle*, February 14 1824.

⁷⁰ Gillis, *For Better, for Worse : British Marriages, 1600 to the Present*, 55-64.

Protestant Americans never viewed weddings as exclusively religious in nature, although wedding celebrations were consistent with religious commitment. By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, the weddings of middle-class, urban Americans were changing – or, for some, had already changed. Weddings began to change among the elite as early as the late eighteenth century. At that time, regardless of denomination, weddings became more formal social occasions. Attendants became more common, and some brides married in white and silver dresses intended to call attention to their purity and their elite status.

But the white dress, the ornate flowers, the church, the bridal march, the tiered cake – as well as a cultural reverence for the wedding as a constitutively sacred occasion, especially for women – were practices that became ubiquitous by mid-century, along with other formal family rituals. Among upper middle class Americans, weddings no longer were public events of carnival and subversion or simple affairs that carefully eschewed sacramental associations. They were now serious, sentimental, and elaborate rites that stressed womanhood, love and tradition. By the end of the nineteenth century, the most common attitude towards weddings was diametrically opposed to the prevailing attitude at the end of the eighteenth century: the more formal symbolism and religious legitimation, the better.⁷¹

Here comes the bride: The Victorian white wedding

Queen Victoria, the monarch of Great Britain from 1837 to 1901, did not single-handedly create the sentimental veneration of middle-class morality and family associated with her reign, nor did she alone create the elaborate white wedding. But she was a visible spokesperson for the values of the family revolution, and she helped to popularize particular wedding practices with her own wedding to Prince Albert in 1840 and the weddings of her

⁷¹ Pleck, *Celebrating the Family : Ethnicity, Consumer Culture, and Family Rituals*, 1.

eldest children in the late 1850s and 1860s. Like the wedding of Prince Charles and Diana Spencer in the next century, Victoria and her family celebrated the marriage rite – using, of course, the Church of England liturgy – in a manner that captured the fancy of countless brides and grooms in England and America.⁷²

First of all, although Victoria married her first cousin and one of a relatively limited pool of eligible Protestant princes, the relationship between Albert and Victoria was rooted, according to Victoria, in authentic feelings of romantic love, something of deep significance to middle-class Anglo-Americans of the period.⁷³ Victoria had twelve bridesmaids, unmarried female members of the royal family, who, like her, were all costumed in “virgin white.”⁷⁴ Her own dress, although simple by royal standards, included a satin train, an elaborate veil, and a wreath of orange blossoms, and she processed into the chapel accompanied by music, reportedly lowering her head modestly, “the personification of dignity, gentleness and love.”⁷⁵ The ornate cake from Victoria’s wedding, large enough to feed thousands, was an aspect of the celebration consistently singled out for comment by press coverage of the day’s festivities. The ten-foot wide plum cake, which weighed approximately three hundred pounds, was adorned with statues of the bride and groom in Roman costume, as well as a statue of Britannica and one of Victoria’s dogs, which was intended to connote fidelity.⁷⁶ (This cake is still with us today in quite a literal sense: in 2007,

⁷² Cele Otnes and Elizabeth Hafkin Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams : The Allure of the Lavish Wedding, Life Passages 2* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 30-33.

⁷³ Walter L. Arnstein, *Queen Victoria* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 51-54.

⁷⁴ "Marriage of the Queen," *American Masonic Register and Literary Companion*, March 14 1840, 282.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Emily Allen, "Culinary Exhibition: Victorian Wedding Cakes and Royal Spectacle," *Victorian Studies* 45, no. 3 (2003): 461.

visitors at an exhibition at Windsor Castle were able to admire some carefully preserved slices.⁷⁷)

Observers on both sides of the Atlantic were interested in Victoria's wedding. The day of the royal wedding, advertisements ran in the *London Times* promising readers illustrations of key wedding moments and locations, as well as "a full description of all matters of fact connected with the Marriage Ceremony and the Court, such as an account of the Wedding Dresses, Jewels, Portraits and Marriage Presents."⁷⁸ A month after Victoria's wedding, an apparently even larger cake was created in a New York theater for a large American celebration of her nuptials.⁷⁹ Etiquette books termed hers a "white wedding," and clearly laid out the rules of such an affair for brides to emulate.⁸⁰

But if people were curious about Victoria's wedding, the nuptials of her children in the next two decades were even more attentively observed and reported. The *New York Times* printed the program for the 1858 wedding of the queen's eldest daughter, Princess Victoria, which included a selection from Richard Wagner's 1850 opera *Lohengrin* – the Bridal Chorus that today is popularly known as "Here Comes the Bride." Women's magazines made much of Princess Victoria's dress, which had an unusually long train for the time (three yards), and was "composed of a rich robe of white moiré antique, ornamented with three flounces of Honiton lace" – the very same style of lace, it was noted, that her mother wore.⁸¹ The liturgy

⁷⁷Maev Kennedy, "Care for Some Cake? Leftovers from 1840 Royal Wedding," *The Guardian*, February 3, 2007.

⁷⁸"Her Majesty's Marriage Advertisement," *The Times*, February 10 1840, "The Nuptial Present and Royal Marriage Guide Advertisement," *The Times*, February 10 1840, "The Observer Advertisement," *The Times*, February 10 1840.

⁷⁹"Festival at Niblo's Garden: In Honor of the Marriage of Her Majesty, Queen Victoria," *The Albion, A Journal of News, Politics and Literature*, March 21 1840, "Queen Victoria's New York Wedding Cake," *Saturday Evening Post*, March 21 1840.

⁸⁰Pleck, *Celebrating the Family : Ethnicity, Consumer Culture, and Family Rituals*, 207.

⁸¹"Prince Frederick William, and the Princess Victoria, of Prussia," *Ballou's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion*, March 13 1858, 172.

was in “strict accordance with the rubric of the English church” and concluded with Handel’s Hallelujah Chorus.

These royal weddings, of course, went far beyond the experience of most middle-class women, which is probably why they were interesting to read about. But the lavish practices of the elite clearly shaped mid-nineteenth century practices for a large number of women. Royal weddings popularized wearing Honiton lace, incorporating orange blossoms into bridal attire, processing to the march from *Lobengrin*, and the central importance of the expensive (but not garish or immodest) white dress. They also strengthened a popular association of weddings with female royalty, with the beautiful and ethereal princess – a link that would be further strengthened in the advertising images of the twentieth century. Moreover, they served as particularly visible reflections of a new and increasingly regular style of female-centered wedding practice – not only among the aristocracy, but among middle-class Americans as well. First, for Victorian women in the United States it was fashionable to marry in a church, although in this period formal ceremonies at home were acceptable as well and more common outside the Northeast. Most brides and grooms were married in religious ceremonies, not in civil weddings.⁸² A distinct engagement period now replaced an informal understanding or a posting of the banns, public notice of an imminent marriage. Couples sent formal invitations to dozens, or sometimes hundreds, of guests.⁸³ The color white, popularized by Queen Victoria, became emblematic of the wedding day; it served as the defining color for the bride’s dress, her veil, her shoes, her bridesmaids’ dresses (a practice that would later change), the icing on the cake. And even for a ruling monarch looking to make alliances with Protestant princes, the wedding was symbolically and rhetorically about the culmination of romantic love.

⁸² Pleck, *Celebrating the Family : Ethnicity, Consumer Culture, and Family Rituals*, 209.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 211.

The spread of the Victorian white wedding was facilitated by widespread social and economic changes in the nineteenth-century United States. The growth of cities, as well as the coalescing of a new industrial economy, nurtured a burgeoning urban middle class with more money to spend on non-essential items like fine clothing, silverware, or floral arrangements. Improvements in communication and transportation allowed middle-class Americans to learn about and disseminate practices and ideas at a rate unknown in previous eras. While there was not yet a “wedding industry” selling ritual objects to prospective brides and many items were still produced at home, a middle-class bride in the 1860s could, with relative ease, look in a magazine at illustrations of the most fashionable bridal gowns from Paris, read poetry about the wedding day, or look over newspaper descriptions of society weddings in her city. She was more likely to have traveled to the weddings of friends and family in other places and learned about new styles of dress trains, processional styles, or wedding gifts. In comparison to her eighteenth century ancestors (and, in all likelihood, her cousins in the rural west), she was more comfortable with the notion of buying, rather than producing, at least a few of the symbolic items for her wedding day. This was also the nascent stage of a mass consumer culture in the United States – something that, as will be argued here, would even more clearly shape what was sacred about weddings in the later nineteenth century.

At the same time, moreover, the wedding emerged as a theatrical and formal rite of passage for women, drawing upon understandings of the sacred that were particular to this middle-class culture. It was not the only family ritual to become more elaborate in this period. The nineteenth century elaboration of the wedding was paralleled by an elaboration

of funerals,⁸⁴ Christmas and other holiday celebrations,⁸⁵ children's birthday parties,⁸⁶ and men's initiation rituals for secret societies, which depicted invented male familial bonds.⁸⁷ While the specific meanings and contexts attributed to these rituals varied, they had certain shared themes: a veneration of family relationships, an appeal to historical continuity and memory, a positioning of women as symbol and creator of the home, and the marketplace as a means of and arena for symbolic expression. The white wedding, like these other rituals, celebrated and perpetuated these themes.

In the sections that follow, I will turn to the Victorian wedding's relationship to particular sacred themes: themes both distinct from and yet dependent upon popular American Christian understandings of the divine. The first of these is the importance of women in the maintenance of home and family. For the respectable Victorian middle class, weddings were rites of passage that ushered single persons into the institution of family life – an institution invested with a new weight of religious and social importance. The wedding did the crucial symbolic work of creating a new home. In a time of anxiety over intense industrialization and urbanization, the tranquil and moral home was vitally important, the location of continuity with the past and the promise of a good future. But in the sections that follow, I will show that the emphasis on the home was strengthened and interwoven with other themes in wedding discourse, particularly that of romantic love, tradition and memory.

⁸⁴ Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains : American Attitudes toward Death, 1799-1883* (New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press, 1996).

⁸⁵ Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Consumer Rites: The Buying and Selling of American Holidays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

⁸⁶ Pleck, *Celebrating the Family : Ethnicity, Consumer Culture, and Family Rituals*, 141-51.

⁸⁷ Mark C. Carnes, *Secret Ritual and Manhood in Victorian America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

The domestic altar: women's significance in the sacred family

In 1815, Sarah Ayer attended a wedding she found moving, and she recorded her reaction in her diary:

What can be more delightful, than to see a whole family assemble round the domestic altar, to offer up their united prayers and thanksgivings to their common Parent? Though there has been many gayer parties, yet I doubt whether there was ever a more cheerful, or happy one.⁸⁸

To Ayer, a wedding in a home with family members present was not only a happy occasion but also an appropriately pious one. To be sure, others might prefer to see the family gathered in the bride's family's church, which obviously had its own sacred associations. But Ayer's journal entry echoed a common sentiment in popular nineteenth-century theology: the home was the foundation of a Christian society and the family was a God-given means to maintain morality and social order.⁸⁹

A marriage in the nineteenth century was not only the creation of a new household, as it might have been viewed more pragmatically in previous times, but the creation of a new *family*, a fairly new construct thick with meanings both symbolic and material. For Victorians, the nuclear family was "an object of worshipful contemplation," a social form that served both as proof of a loving God and an alternative to earlier communal models of religious expression.⁹⁰ For most American Christians, family life itself took on a sacramental quality, and in an apparent "inversion" of traditional views of divine order, the middle class began to "worship God through their families."⁹¹ In earlier centuries – and, notably, among some communitarian religious groups in the nineteenth century – Americans and Europeans might

⁸⁸ Sarah Newman Connell Ayer, "Diary of Sarah Ayer, November 1815," in *Diary of Sarah Connell Ayer* (Portland, Maine: Lefavor-Tower Co., 1910).

⁸⁹ Colleen McDannell, *The Christian Home in Victorian America, 1840-1900, Religion in North America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 1-19.

⁹⁰ Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making : Myth, Ritual, and the Quest for Family Values*, 71.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

have looked to church or village for collective religious experience. But, increasingly, it was the loving family home where new Christians were taught and nurtured. It was the place where men, who might work in worldly surroundings, were rejuvenated and kept pious. It was the best and most reliable path to personal happiness for both genders and the foundation for the moral inculcation of children.

A marriage, as the inaugural event in the creation of a new family, was viewed as essentially important for society and for individuals of both genders. But in the middle of the nineteenth century, many, as now, feared that the institution was under siege. Small but visible religious dissenters strained against the increasingly dominant notion that Christianity was best practiced in private family homes. Communitarian groups such as the Shakers, the Oneida Community and the Mormons experimented dramatically with marriage and family forms, to the horror and outrage of most Americans of the time. The Shakers, who taught that sexual intercourse in any kind of relationship was a source of sin, lived in largely gender-segregated communities and raised children only when they entered the community as converts. The Oneida Community, a smaller perfectionist sect that saw sex as a way to unify a perfected group of Christians, discouraged sexual preferences for particular individuals and encouraged both frequent consensual sex partners and collective childrearing. But Mormon plural marriage, or polygamy, was the most widely discussed and sustained example of alternate family arrangements in the United States. Polygamy, practiced by a relatively small percentage of Mormons living in Utah territory from the late 1840s until 1890, represented such a moral threat to middle-class Americans that it was, with slavery, one of the two “relics of barbarism” opposed by the Republican party in its founding platform. Polygamy was objectionable because it explicitly transgressed the family patterns assumed to be most compatible with Christianity – and especially, for most observers, because it seemed to

degrade women. Family and monogamy were seen as being in the best interest of women and essential to female dignity and happiness.

Both men and women then, as now, spoke of their wedding day as the happiest day of their lives.⁹² Yet it was also generally acknowledged that the ritual details of the wedding were of greater interest to women than to men. Mid- and late nineteenth century voices consistently described the wedding day as the most important and definitive event in the life of a woman, observed that the groom tended to be put in the background, and reiterated that female fascination with weddings was something of exceptional note.⁹³ This had not always been the case. In the colonial period, a wedding also could signify an important change in a woman's life – likely an increase in her authority, as the manager of her own household. But it was a “brief pause, not a disruption, in the daily routine ... [and] the rhythm of life in this rural society was not broken up by a trip to the altar.”⁹⁴ In the nineteenth century, a wedding became a widely acknowledged, purposeful and highly symbolic interruption of everyday life for women.

That weddings became so bride-centered seems in large part because marriage itself marked a more dramatic, even traumatic, transformation for the bride. The spread of urban market capitalism meant that the traditional division of labor associated with farming was no longer a reality for many middle-class women and men, particularly in eastern cities. One effect of mid-nineteenth century industrialization and urbanization was the symbolic elevation of the family. Men now ventured out of the home and into the world to make their

⁹²C.F. Carter, "Introduction," in *The Wedding Day in Literature and Art: A Collection of the Best Descriptions of Weddings from the Works of the World's Leading Novelists and Poets, Richly Illustrated with Reproductions of Famous Paintings of Incidents of the Nuptial Day*, ed. C.F. Carter (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1900), v.

⁹³ In one example, during the 1886 wedding of President Grover Cleveland, the *Atlanta Constitution* reported the “anxiety” of New York women to get a look at the bridal party. “You never saw anything like it ... Women forced themselves into the crowd.” NYM Crinkle, "Cleveland's Wedding," *The Atlanta Constitution*, June 7 1886, 1.

⁹⁴ Rothman, *Hands and Hearts : A History of Courtship in America*, 74.

living, and women were assigned to the domestic sphere, where they were intended to be guardians of middle-class culture and morality. John Gillis's history of Victorian family life described the role of the ideal family in this period as explicitly religious. The family home was, in many respects, a "newly enchanted world."⁹⁵ Members of the nuclear family began to take particular exemplary sacred roles – the saintly mother, the good family man, the adoring and innocent child – that had previously been located in communal or divine figures, and never so close to home.⁹⁶ Above all others, it was the mother who was responsible for creating and maintaining the construct of the ideal family. Harriet Beecher Stowe saw the role of a pious woman as analogous (if not superior) to the role of a clergyman. Working in a Christian home, a place "more saintly and pure than church or altar," a woman could be a "[p]riestess, wife and mother." In the home she "ministers daily in holy works of household peace, and by faith and prayer and love redeems from grossness and earthliness the common toils and wants of life."⁹⁷ Serving as the "priestess" of the home required a host of new ritual and symbolic responsibilities for women, and these responsibilities relied upon and reinforced a constellation of new and powerful ideas about womanhood itself.

The "cult of True Womanhood," the well-known scholarly term coined by historian Barbara Welter in 1966, notably appropriated the language of religious studies to describe this ideology of femininity. The word "cult" is used to describe a consistent nineteenth-century devotion to a gender ideal perpetuated through the language and images of women's magazines, advice books, religious leaders and medical authorities, among others. While the True Womanhood ideal never entirely reflected the real lives of women, it certainly did affect them and it shaped in unique and innovative ways how the wedding ritual was carried out

⁹⁵ Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making : Myth, Ritual, and the Quest for Family Values*, 77.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁹⁷ Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The Minister's Wooing* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999), 326.

and understood. The True Woman, as Welter interpreted her, both practiced and symbolized four central virtues: piety (a natural devotion to Protestant religion and morality); purity (the diligent avoidance of sexual corruption both real and perceived); submissiveness (a humble suppression of will in support of male leadership); and domesticity (an active commitment to the preservation and improvement of home and hearth as a cornerstone of American society).⁹⁸ As Welter pointed out, implicit in this ideal were several potential dilemmas for middle-class women as they approached their wedding day. For a woman who has been meticulously maintaining her sexual purity, what does the imminent deflowering of the wedding night imply about her virtue? If women are indeed viewed as more in line with religious and moral sentiments than men and will be the guardians of goodness in the home, then why do they promise to “obey” their husbands in the wedding vows? If commitment to her husband above all others is one of a True Woman’s orienting aims, who will she turn to for companionship and support when he is out in the world, and she is tending to home and hearth?

Advice columnists usually assumed that all women were eager to obtain the “precious treasure” of a husband, and many women did desire the financial security, social legitimacy, and personal fulfillment promised in marriage.⁹⁹ Yet for a middle-class woman afforded some autonomy and education in her unmarried years, a wedding could mean the start of an entirely “new life”¹⁰⁰ – and not necessarily one that looked appealing. For one, accounts of nineteenth century weddings were full of grief over the bride’s separation from her own parents and siblings – a “lopping off from the parent vine” that would “tear her forever from the loved objects and scenes of her childhood home,” as one 1857 church

⁹⁸Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2, Part 1. (1966): 152.

⁹⁹"About Matrimony," *Los Angeles Times*, January 6 1881, 4.

¹⁰⁰Crinkle, "Cleveland's Wedding."

periodical put it.¹⁰¹ Her future might be happy, one advice column noted, but “many old ties are apt to be severed or loosed, and [so during her wedding] she should see around her only the faces of those she cares for and who care for her.”¹⁰² One advice book from later in the century marveled at the inherent “impudence” of the average bridegroom, who in effect was saying to his bride: “I will be more to you than your father and mother, more than all the friends you ever had or ever can have. Give up everything and take me.”¹⁰³

And while the bride might indeed be giving up “everything” for the love of a new husband, this new and potentially thrilling companionship with one’s beloved known during courtship was likely going to be disrupted as he moved out into society and she turned towards the home. Moreover, married women were not only emotionally and symbolically dependent upon their chosen husbands; doing little work that provided income, they were financially dependent as well. Women were tethered, in most respects, to home, children and domestic life.¹⁰⁴ One sermon on marriage published in the late nineteenth century reminded young women of this in a startling way: while a man might escape an unhappy marriage by spending his evenings at the club, a woman “cannot afford to make a mistake,” as “nothing but a funeral can relieve it.”¹⁰⁵ As historian of courtship Ellen Rothman put it, a married woman “would no longer be free to come and go from the domestic circle; she would be enclosed within and defined by it.”¹⁰⁶ Planning for a lovely wedding, according to Rothman

¹⁰¹S.P., “The Christian Home Xxix - Match-Making,” *German Reformed Messenger*, March 18 1857, 1.

¹⁰² “Wedding Customs,” *Harper's Bazaar*, April 14 1877, 234.

¹⁰³ T. DeWitt Talmage, *The Wedding Ring, a Series of Sermons* (New York: Grand Union Tea Comany, 1886), 72.

¹⁰⁴ Rothman, *Hands and Hearts : A History of Courtship in America*, 73-75.

¹⁰⁵ Talmage, *The Wedding Ring, a Series of Sermons*, 28-29.

¹⁰⁶ Rothman, *Hands and Hearts : A History of Courtship in America*, 73.

and confirmed in journal accounts of the time, could serve as a kind of distraction from the anxieties surrounding the transition.¹⁰⁷

The concerns of women about their new role shaped, in some part, the form of the wedding ritual. One recurring anxiety surrounding marriage seemed to have involved the loss of virginity assumed to be inevitable on the wedding night. Purity was taken to be something that came naturally to women, who were largely understood at the time as lacking sexual desire – although the lasciviousness of some men could warp innocent or foolish girls, who would then fall into ruin.¹⁰⁸ For a virginal bride, the first sexual experience could be viewed as at best mysterious and at worst a real loss: an unpleasant, irreversible and even violent sacrifice made out of love for her new husband. Thus, it became more important that the wedding emphasize the purity of the bride, costuming her and surrounding her in the color white (IMAGE ONE). Weddings accordingly deemphasized sexually heightened play or humor, as had been fairly common in the earlier era. One late eighteenth-century male observer made an early plea for decorum in wedding ceremonies for the sake of the poor bride, who, if a woman of sensitivity, was already embarrassed and terrified enough. Remember, he argued, the very “happiness or misery of her life” depended on her choice of a groom. Moreover, the groom will shortly claim his “privilege,” and “the delicate reserve in which she has all her life been brought up is in an instant to be sacrificed to his inclination.” Given these factors, nothing could be “more cruel” than to heighten her anxiety with

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 75.

¹⁰⁸ Karen Lystra and others have argued that many historians overstate the nineteenth-century emphasis on female sexual purity, and that most people did not assume married women were asexual. Looking at love letters between married and unmarried Americans, Lystra points to considerable sexual expression and frank talk about female sexual desire. While this is further reminder that sexual ideals and actual practice are not to be conflated, it seems hard to overlook that there was a *rhetoric* of explicit and implicit female asexuality in discourse of the time, especially in discourse about weddings. Karen Lystra, *Searching the Heart : Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

“improper jocularities” or dirty jokes.¹⁰⁹ Accordingly, the middle-class wedding began to distance itself from the raucous village celebration and become a ceremony that emphasized the beauty of female purity and modesty. Indeed, in comparison to wedding rites throughout the world and in history, the Western white wedding involves relatively few overt symbols of or references to sexuality.¹¹⁰

But the white wedding was more than simply distraction of the bride from her anxieties; it also was a ritual that, in making her the center of the day, attempted to resolve and transcend these anxieties for women. It allowed a bride to theatrically step into the role of True Woman in front of her new husband, friends and family, enacting this status for all involved. The new style of white wedding carefully celebrated and glorified a certain version of femininity, presenting the bride as a beautiful symbol of piety, purity, submission and domesticity and thus reassuring her and everyone present of her lofty, even sacred, place in society. Indeed, a woman’s wedding could be viewed as a time when she would especially or initially embody superior feminine qualities. In the 1867 novel *Outpost*, a groom sneaking to see the bride on her wedding day admired her: “And how lovely you are to-day, Dora! You never looked like this before.” She identified the source of her physical transformation handily: “It never was my wedding-day before.”¹¹¹ When Ellen Emerson saw her sister Edith on her wedding day in 1866, she remarked that her sister looked “so bridal and heavenly that I was astonished. I never imagined that she would be more lovely than usual in her wedding-dress.” Ellen wrote that the bride “seemed so high a creature with whom we had nothing to

¹⁰⁹ David West, *The American Spectator, or Matrimonial Preceptor. A Collection (with Additions and Variations) of Essays, Epistles, Precepts and Examples, Relating to the Married State, from the Most Celebrated Writers, Ancient and Modern. Adapted to the State of Society in the American Republic.* (Boston, Massachusetts: Manning, William; Loring, James; West, David, 1797), 107-08.

¹¹⁰ Mark Jordan observes this in his analysis of a contemporary bridal magazine. Its readers, he notes, have a great deal to buy, but “little or nothing of it is related to copulation or reproduction.” Mark D. Jordan, *Blessing Same-Sex Unions : The Perils of Queer Romance and the Confusions of Christian Marriage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 80-81.

¹¹¹ Jane Goodwin Austin, *Outpost* (Fairfield, IA: 1st World Library, 2004), 404.

do that I can hardly tell you how strange and happy it was to see the dear familiar child come afterward to kiss her mother, and find it was our Edith after all.”¹¹² The wedding day could also endow the bride with a new aura of virtue (which, in the discourse of True Womanhood, was connected to physical beauty.) In 1828, the Massachusetts novelist Catharine Sedgwick spent time with her friend, Eliza Cabot, during the week before Cabot’s wedding. On the day of the wedding, Sedgwick marveled in her journal at the way that the bride’s character had “come out like thrice-refined gold.” In the process of preparing for her wedding, Cabot had shown “sweet serenity,” “celestial feeling,” as well as “devotion, benevolence, charity, sisterly love, friendship.”¹¹³ Sedgwick was a particular admirer of Cabot’s, but she listed the kind of characteristics that were, under the best of circumstances, supposed to emerge in brides. Even Queen Victoria, monarch of one of the most powerful countries in the world, was described as being especially modest and submissive on her wedding day and processed up the aisle as “the personification of dignity, gentleness and love.”¹¹⁴ A new bride was herself a symbol of the new home and family she would oversee, a symbolic role that was both constraining and potentially thrilling. The white wedding allowed women to be identified with and as embodiment of the sacred.

The virginal and yet maternal True Woman, especially veiled and surrounded by candles on her wedding day, bore a certain visual resemblance to that most famous of sacred virgins and mothers: Mary, the mother of Christ. The Virgin Mary was not traditionally a favored figure among evangelical Protestants, who tended to find devotion to her to be idolatrous, superstitious and creepily Papist. Yet in the second half of the nineteenth century, Protestant Anglo-American artists and intellectuals were drawn to visual images of Mary or

¹¹² Henry Ward Beecher, "Wedding Bazaars," *Godey's Lady's Book and Magazine*, March 1870.

¹¹³ Catharine Maria Sedgwick, "Diary of Catharine Maria Sedgwick, September, 1828," in *Life and Letters of Catherine M. Sedgwick*, ed. Mary E. Dewey (New York: Harper & Row, 1871), 446.

¹¹⁴ "Marriage of the Queen," 281.

images of the idealized feminine with Marian attributes.¹¹⁵ Catholics frequently depicted Mary and the saints as loving, gentle mediators, who possessed many virtues valued in nineteenth-century women. Historian Ann Braude has noted that the Cult of True Womanhood coincided with the Marian Century, 1850-1950, when Marian devotion reached its height.¹¹⁶ A broad interest in imagery of virginity and motherhood was heightened by the appeal of the “grandeur” and “sensuality” of Catholic art and ritual among middle-class Protestants in general.¹¹⁷ Visual references to women as saints and madonnas spilled over into the aesthetic of wedding ceremonies, where the ideal bride was veiled, virginal and otherworldly.

The wedding of Mary Scudder, the central character in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s 1859 novel *The Minister’s Wooing*, was a Protestant ceremony that borrowed Catholic imagery to emphasize the aesthetic beauty of the bride’s piety. Mary Scudder was an exemplary True Woman: a pure, submissive and pious girl, who won sinners back to the fold by her passive example. Although the novel was set in eighteenth-century Calvinist New England, Stowe compared her heroine repeatedly to a saint or to the mother of Christ. Her wedding was in a parlor formally decorated with evergreen “so that the room looked just like the Episcopal Church at Christmas,” and she wore a pearl cross around her neck given to her by a French Catholic friend, who described her as “as true a saint as Saint Catherine.”¹¹⁸ These visual representations of the sacred ultimately called attention to the modesty, devotion and beauty of the bride. Stowe describes Mary, in her wedding attire, as an ethereal and saintly figure:

¹¹⁵ T.J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 248.

¹¹⁶ Ann Braude, “Women’s History Is American Religious History,” in *Retelling U.S. Religious History*, ed. Thomas A. Tweed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 105.

¹¹⁷ Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920*, 186.

¹¹⁸ Stowe, *The Minister’s Wooing*, 227.

[S]he had on a wreath of lilies of the valley, and a gauze veil that came a' most down to her feet and came all around her like a cloud, and you could see her white shining dress through it every time she moved. And she looked just as white as a snowberry, but there were two little pink spots that came coming and going in her cheeks, that kind of lightened up when she smiled, and then faded down again.

When the groom, Jim, saaw her, he looked at her “as if she was something he wouldn’t dare to touch.” He told a bystander that he was afraid Mary “has wings somewhere that will fly away from me.”¹¹⁹ On her wedding day, Stowe’s *True Woman* was identified with multiple archetypes, none traditionally Protestant: angel, saint, Virgin Mary.

Later the link between the bride and the Virgin Mary – as well as angels, goddesses, saints, princesses and other visual images of sacred femininity – would be further strengthened and transformed by advertisers. In the nineteenth century, the ideal bride was sacred in part because the family and home was sacred, an essential route to Christian piety. But though marriage was viewed as something favored by God, it was also viewed as something that must be freely entered into by men and women alike. In a culture that increasingly valued the individual, it became important that weddings were the culmination not of paternal directives over the lives of young people, but of romantic love, a mysterious and powerful entity that on the one hand profoundly dictated individual choice in marriage and yet also preserved individual autonomy and expression.

“Give all to love:” romantic love as sacred actor

If being a bride could represent such a traumatic change for middle-class women, one might well ask why women married at all. (Certainly there were those who did not want to, and it was not uncommon for young women to speak disparagingly of “matrimony” in their diaries, a trend that would become more pronounced in the late nineteenth- and early

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 322-23.

twentieth-century.¹²⁰) Marriage did have potential advantages to middle-class women, including social legitimacy, financial security and the promised satisfaction of serving as the “high priestess” of a good home. But these were not the motivations for marriage most prominently presented in novels or poems and not the ones frequently mentioned by young women in letters to their betrothed. Marriage was spoken of as the happy culmination of a romance, and a wedding could be the deeply moving climax to the experience of romantic love.

By the nineteenth century, both men and women spoke of romantic love in terms of ultimate significance, and it had taken on sacred roles both independent of and connected to traditional Protestantism. Because we still live in a culture that views romantic love largely as an unquestioned good, it can be difficult to perceive how great a change this was, and that it was a change that was not always viewed as consistent with traditional Christian piety. By the early twentieth century, sociologist Max Weber observed that in modernity, romantic, erotic love had offered a competing source of salvation for Western religions. In erotic love, Weber noted, one was offered an ecstatic experience, an “unsurpassable peak” so fulfilling and so overpowering that it was treated a kind of “sacrament.” This was an emotional and irrational experience deeply craved in the modern world, according to Weber, which had been stripped of its gods, and was constrained by routine, rational order and bureaucracy. But to find this ecstasy in preferential love for an individual was inherently in tension with Christianity, which instructed its adherents to love broadly and selflessly, to love their neighbors as themselves.¹²¹

¹²⁰ See, for example, Louisa May Alcott, "Diary of Louisa May Alcott, February 1860," in *Louisa May Alcott: Her Life, Letters and Journals*, ed. Ednah D. Cheney (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1889), 352.

¹²¹ Robert Neelly Bellah, "Max Weber and World-Denying Love: A Look at the Historical Sociology of Religion," in *Humanities Center and Burke Lectureship on Religion and Society* (University of California, San Diego 1997), 21, Max Weber, "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions,"

For women especially, the experience of being touched by love (even tragic or unreciprocated love) was viewed as a path to maturity and a source of meaning, identity and value. Men, too, were viewed as improved and transformed by personal love, but there existed alternative ways they could live meaningful lives. One 1846 columnist warned women that while a man may “possibly fill up some kind of an existence without loving,” a woman without someone “to love, cherish, care for and minister to” is an “anomaly in the universe, an existence without an object.”¹²² Women had identities defined entirely by their relationship to loving and being loved.

The Victorian middle class, especially in the United States, had a real horror of the arranged, coerced or loveless marriage. This aversion, too, was a break with a long established tradition of Western marriage. As Stephanie Coontz has argued, the rise of the “love match” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was nothing less than revolutionary in Western culture.¹²³ With the rise of market capitalism came the ideal that marriage, too, ought to operate like a free market, with individuals choosing to marry freely on the basis of individual preferences rather than doing so for familial or economic reasons. Eighteenth-century conservatives fretted that marrying on the basis of love – which was, at heart, the Enlightenment “pursuit of happiness” – would not be a stable means of organizing society, and that the institution of marriage would no longer be secure.¹²⁴ After all, if anyone could choose based on preference, what would prevent young people (and especially women) from

in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H.H. and C. Wright Mills Gerth (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 346-47.

¹²² Women Meant for Marriage 1846

¹²³ Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History: From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005), 149.

¹²⁴ Coontz observes that these arguments, although premature in the eighteenth century, were ultimately proved correct. Ibid. Stephanie Coontz, "Courting Trouble? The World Historic Transformation of Love and Marriage," in *MARIAL Center Colloquium* (Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia: 2007).

choosing poorly? What would keep people loyal to society, church and household if they were absorbed solely in their duty to each other?

These worries were largely overcome by the rise of a devotion to romantic love, a force that had its own power and morality, which was fast being viewed as the most desirable means of organizing middle-class marriages. To compensate, perhaps, for the unpredictability and instability of tethering marriage to subjective whims, “love” was frequently spoken of as an agent outside of individuals: something acting upon them rather than within them. (This follows, of course, in a long classical tradition of viewing love as a deity.) A favored subject in Victorian discourse was love as an otherworldly entity – one that capriciously chose its subjects but was powerful enough that all were ultimately helpless to it. An anonymous 1858 poem summarized love’s role in the route to matrimony in a somewhat irreverent way:

Cupid fans the holy flame –
 Rankest kind of arson.
 When it gains a certain height
 Pop! Goes the parson.¹²⁵

But love was also seen as a moral imperative in its own right. Ralph Waldo Emerson, in a 1846 poem, instructed the reader to “give all to love” and to be prepared to give up friends, family, time, fortune, plans for the future, and one’s muse if one wants to receive the “reward” of love. One must, Emerson suggested, completely subsume all other desires to the whim of love:

‘Tis a brave master;
 Let it have scope:
 Follow it utterly,
 Hope beyond hope:
 High and more high
 It dives into noon,
 With wing unspent,

¹²⁵ Anonymous, "Matrimony," *Dover Gazette & Strafford Advertiser*, January 30 1858.

Untold intent;
 But it is a god,
 Knows its own path
 And the outlets of the sky.¹²⁶

In this view of love – one not unique among nineteenth-century poets and novelists – love is an ultimate good, with its own moral logic.

As historian of marriage John Gillis has observed, romance was not new in the nineteenth century. But before the rise of the cult of exclusive romantic love, there were other potential legitimate outlets for expressions of devotion: in same-sex friendships, in relationships with spiritual figures, between countrymen, towards royal figures.¹²⁷ In the nineteenth century, heterosexual romantic love triumphed over all other expressions of affection (with the exception, perhaps, of maternal love) as the highest and noblest feeling one human being could harbor towards another human being. In some respects, this emphasis on romantic love is a part of the rise of the nuclear family; it was the same “narrowing of affections” that led nineteenth-century Americans to speak so reverently of home life. But romantic love was a theme with its own power and myth even outside of the veneration of the family. The burgeoning market for popular novels was one arena for the spread of this ideology. As eighteenth-century conservatives had feared, being in the thrall of romantic love began to be presented by poets and novelists as an understandable and even sympathetic motivation for all kinds of otherwise inexcusable acts. It might justify questioning one’s religion (as the virtuous Mary Scudder did in Stowe’s *Minister’s Wooing*),¹²⁸ having extramarital sex (as Hawthorne suggested it does in *The Scarlet Letter*), betraying

¹²⁶ Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Give All to Love," in *Poetry of the New England Renaissance, 1790-1890*, ed. George F. Whicher (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965), 70.

¹²⁷ Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making: Myth, Ritual, and the Quest for Family Values*, 133.

¹²⁸ When her beloved is presumed dead without having had a clear-cut conversion experience, Mary is plagued by questions about his salvation that, Stowe tells us, are vital “to all who feel the infinite sacredness of love!” Stowe, *The Minister’s Wooing*, 205.

others, engaging in murder, or even suicide. Romantic love was also commonly represented as something that could conquer or survive death itself – a representation that would become an even more favored trope in the twentieth century.

Holding love in this high esteem was, for some, potentially incompatible with Christianity. Seventeenth century New England Puritan ministers had warned against loving spouses excessively – for, as historian Edmund Morgan explained, “[t]o prize them too highly was to upset the order to creation and descend to idolatry.”¹²⁹ Love letters in the nineteenth century sometimes expressed unease about the extent to which one human being should express love for another. In 1852, pious Presbyterian Harriett Newell wrote to her “beloved Zebulon” requesting that in his letters he temper his outpourings of devotion for her: “My Dear one it certainly was a violation both of the Sabbath & the holy word of God for you to write such an idolatrus letter as I pronounce your last to be [sic].” Apologizing for correcting him and assuring him of her love, she maintained that “I know it to be my duty to warn you against such an error as I know you are committing when you say that your love for me amounts to Idolatry – I cant bare the idea of one so dear to me as you possessing such a fault – so, My beloved – Zebulon, do express your self differently [sic].”¹³⁰ As Weber noted, it was possible to see deep emotional investment in personal love as being a rival to serious religious commitment.

Yet in the United States, there was also a popular understanding that the Christian God condoned and expressed his will through the powerful influence of love on young hearts. Romantic love was spoken of in salvific terms not because it offered an entirely

¹²⁹ Edmund Sears Morgan, *The Puritan Family; Religion & Domestic Relations in Seventeenth-Century New England*, New ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 50-51. in Lystra, *Searching the Heart : Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America*, 240.

¹³⁰ Harriett Newell Espy Vance, "Letter from Harriett Newell Vance to Zebulon Baird Vance, 1852," in *My Beloved Zebulon: The Correspondence of Zebulon Baird Vance and Harriett Newell Espy* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1852), 54.

alternate, secular form of salvation, but because it was increasingly endowed with Christian significance and functions. New York pastor DeWitt Talmage assured young people in 1886 that “[t]here is in all the world some one who was made for you, as certainly as Eve was made for Adam.” But if you wish to find this person, Talmage advised, eschew worldly matchmakers and trust your own feelings and judgment, never failing to pray for divine guidance.¹³¹ In letters, men and women frequently conveyed their convictions that their romantic relationships were the way that God guided them towards spiritual improvement. In an 1846 letter, Emily Chubbuck expressed gladness that rather than correcting her worldliness with “severe punishment,” God chose to send her a beloved fiancé “to love and care for, to guide and strengthen me.”¹³² In somewhat stronger terms, Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote to his beloved Sophia that “God gave you to me to be the salvation of my soul,” which, as Karen Lystra observes, although crediting God, is attributing a great deal of power to the role of love towards another human self.¹³³ As with Victorian discourse about the family, love letters frequently used the language of Christian salvation and rebirth, of worship and sacrament, to describe the significance of human relationships. The church wedding was a ritual that depended, in many ways, on the popular understanding that exclusive romantic love served the purposes of Christian piety.

If the white wedding sought to dramatically create ideal women to serve as caretakers of religion and family, it drew in large part upon the power and legitimacy of romantic love to be effective. Middle-class weddings, now no longer primarily rituals of community ties, were also starting to develop into celebrations of personal fulfillment between two individual

¹³¹ Talmage, *The Wedding Ring, a Series of Sermons*, 14, 71.

¹³² Emily Chubbuck Judson, "Letter from Emily Chubbuck Judson," in *The Life and Letters of Mrs. Emily C. Judson*, ed. Asahel C. Kendrick (New York, NY: Sheldon & Co., 1846), 156.

¹³³ Lystra, *Searching the Heart : Women, Men, and Romantic Love in Nineteenth-Century America*, 246.

selves, an emphasis that would become even more pronounced in the twentieth century.

Again, popular literature helped to perpetuate this ideology. English poet Jean Ingelow drew a boundary between the private world of the bride and groom on their wedding day and the rest of society:

It's we two, it's we two, while the world's away,
Sitting by the golden sheaves on our wedding day.¹³⁴

The preference for privacy was reflected in popular wedding practice as well. Whereas once an entire village or household might attend a wedding without any invitation at all, for Victorian Americans it became increasingly important that weddings were exclusive and private, with the focus entirely on the bride and groom. Any unwanted public attention, including too elaborate a wedding, could vulgarize this experience. In 1872, a newspaper columnist expressed distaste for too many guests and for ostentation and pomp in church weddings, as they took away from the “tender impressiveness” of the ceremony.¹³⁵ Brides were advised to give out cards in wedding invitations to be presented at the door of the church, “as otherwise the principal part of the church is apt to be filled with strangers” and to reserve special seats at the front for family and intimate friends.¹³⁶ The wedding was no longer a raucous celebration for community, but an intimate occasion between two selves, their families and their God.

As weddings were increasingly viewed as the dramatic culmination of personal love, more attention and resources were devoted to the aesthetics and stage management of the ceremony, although some saw a tension between the pageantry of a wedding and sincere

¹³⁴ Jean Ingelow, "Like a Laverock in the Lift," in *The Wedding Day in Literature and Art: A Collection of the Best Descriptions of Weddings from the Works of the World's Leading Novelists and Poets, Richly Illustrated with Reproductions of Famous Paintings of Incidents of the Nuptial Day*, ed. C.F. Carter (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1900), 22.

¹³⁵ "Marriage Vulgarized," *The New York Times*, June 23 1872, 4.

¹³⁶ "Wedding Customs," 234.

romantic devotion. Fashionable weddings were solemn occasions that appropriately “borrow[ed] some touch of romantic interest from the sentiment attached,”¹³⁷ drawing upon material objects to set a sentimental mood for guests and participants. Especially in the second half of the nineteenth century, the choice and position of flowers, the music and the lighting became much more significant during wedding ceremonies and receptions. Women frequently made note of such details in their diaries and wrote about them to other women in letters. In 1855, Elizabeth Lomax admired the elegant atmosphere of a wedding reception in Washington D.C.: “[t]he house was lighted by dozens of wax candles, flowers in abundance, soft music, delicious refreshments and champagne corks popping every moment.”¹³⁸ Newspaper coverage of a prominent 1870 wedding noted that the church ceremony was “profusely and tastefully decorated with flowers,” and followed by a “grand” reception at which “the house and grounds were a blaze of light.”¹³⁹ An 1875 letter reported that during one “stylish” morning wedding “the rooms were darkened, and lighted by lamps” and the house was “prettily trimmed with evergreens.”¹⁴⁰ Lavish symbolic details that emphasized the coming together of two selves, like incorporating the intertwined first initials of the bride and groom into floral arrangements, also began to become common, especially in urban areas. But those who valued a more individualist romantic aesthetic also sometimes saw these expensive and fashionable practices as antithetical to an authentic wedding. In 1860, Mollie Dorsey Sanford framed her modest Nebraska wedding as romantic in both setting and spirit:

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Elizabeth Lindsay Lomax, "Diary of Elizabeth Lindsay Lomax, January 1855," in *Leaves from an Old Washington Diary*, ed. Lindsay Lomax Wood (New York: Books, Inc., 1943), 256.

¹³⁹ Anonymous, "Distinguished Wedding," *Massachusetts Ploughman and New England Journal of Agriculture* 29, no. 44 (1870).

¹⁴⁰ Alice Kirk Grierson, "Letter from Alice Kirk Grierson to Robert Grierson, November 09, 1875," in *The Colonel's Lady on the Western Frontier: The Correspondence of Alice Kirk Grierson*, ed. Shirley A. Leckie (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 255.

And we were married in the kitchen! Start not, ye fairy brides. Beneath your veils and orange blossoms, in some home where wealth and fashion congregate, your vows are no truer, your heart no happier, than this maiden's, in the kitchen in a log cabin in the wilderness of Nebraska.

While veils, orange blossoms and fashion are associated with a wedding full of romance and happiness, a “primitive” wedding like Sanford’s was, her diary entry stresses, just as meaningful, if not more so.¹⁴¹ The perception of tension between marketplace fashion and authentic individual experience was something that would survive into discourse about twentieth-century weddings as well.

Weddings also began to be immediately followed with a new ritual innovation: the honeymoon. Travel immediately after one’s wedding was not itself new. As late as the 1850s, it was widely considered proper for recently married couples to travel in order to pay calls to relatives and associates in other towns, and family members or other couples frequently accompanied them. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the newly-married were encouraged by wedding advice books to take a trip in private to enjoy a “honeymoon of repose, exempted from the claims of society.”¹⁴² During this time, the couple was assumed to enjoy the pleasures associated with exclusive romantic love, untouched by interference from friends and family. Natural wonders, such as Niagara Falls, were viewed as ideal locations for the couple’s seclusion, as they provided both the “awe-inspiring natural beauty” and “primitive surroundings” associated with modern romance.¹⁴³ The Romantic association of love, natural beauty and isolation from a distracting and artificial society did not limit itself to the urban middle class alone. Following Sanford’s Nebraska wedding, she and her new

¹⁴¹ Mollie Dorsey Sanford, "Diary of Mollie Dorsey Sanford, February, 1864," in *Mollie: The Journal of Mollie Dorsey Sanford in Nebraska and Colorado Territories, 1857-1866* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1959), 112.

¹⁴² Rothman, *Hands and Hearts : A History of Courtship in America*, 25. in Kris; Bulcroft Bulcroft, Richard; Smeins, Linda; Cranage, Helen, "The Social Construction of the North American Honeymoon, 1880-1995," *Journal of Family History* 22, no. 4 (1997): 7.

¹⁴³ Bulcroft, "The Social Construction of the North American Honeymoon, 1880-1995," 14.

husband Byron “took a long walk over the prairies ... just to be by ourselves,” according to her diary account. “Arm and arm we trod the russet grass, the soft grey light above,” Sanford wrote, “and away off to the west the sky was banked with golden clouds in the coming sunset.”¹⁴⁴ Natural beauty enhanced enjoyment of the other and stressed the couple’s solitude in the world.

The popularity of romantic fiction in the nineteenth century also meant that middle-class women were more likely to associate weddings with particular narrative structures. Weddings had served as the happy climaxes to tales of romance in Western literature at least dating back to the comedies of Shakespeare, but in the nineteenth century, the rise of the novel and short fiction aimed at women made it *de rigueur* to end a romantic narrative with a wedding, or at least an engagement. Although advice books counseled them to be wary of the idea “that the obligations of life are to be learned from the highly colored pages of a romance,” it seems that these narratives affected women’s views of their wedding days.¹⁴⁵ Some spoke of weddings as the end of the most exciting part of their lives. For example, after Mollie Dorsey Sanford’s wedding day, she wondered in her diary if she would “journalize” as much as she used to, as “[t]hey say the romance fades from one’s life after marriage.”¹⁴⁶ Most of the time, one’s wedding day was the start of a new and blissful life, the equivalent of “happily ever after” in a fairy tale. Some advice books warned the newly-married to temper their hopes, as “[d]oubtless golden visions of the future are enchanting your hearts, and you scarcely indulge a doubt that your highest expectations will be realized.”¹⁴⁷ But other writers, such as Henry Ward Beecher, spoke of the wedding day as a

¹⁴⁴ Sanford, "Diary of Mollie Dorsey Sanford, February, 1864," 112.

¹⁴⁵ F. Saunders, *About Woman, Love and Marriage* (New York: G.W. Carleton & Company, 1874), 214.

¹⁴⁶ Sanford, "Diary of Mollie Dorsey Sanford, February, 1864," 112.

¹⁴⁷ William M. Thayer, *Pastor's Wedding Gift* (Boston: Nichols and Noyes, 1867), 17.

“day of universal sympathy” as “everyone’s eyes look benignly on the happy pair.” Beecher believed that people enjoyed weddings because they represented the hope that the “irresistible power of love” would overcome death and sickness. Guests rose out of their “dull and droning lives” to throw flowers upon the couple’s path.¹⁴⁸ But although marriage marked the promise of new life in blissful love, the new life would not, in all likelihood, live up to its promise. Beecher suggested that a wedding allowed guests to enter into the hope that it would anyway.

In this respect, the wedding was viewed as both ending and beginning – which required, in Victorian discourse, that it be placed in the context of a larger story about both the life courses of individuals and the long march of history. Wedding rituals increasingly drew upon the legitimacy of history and memory, and even as they retained their reputation as symbols of a day of joy, they became associated and juxtaposed with the coming of death.

Just like your great-grandmother: history, memory, and death as sacred themes

The white wedding drew upon new understandings of womanhood and romantic love brought about in part by societal-level economic changes. But they were not commonly presented or understood as new or innovative practices. Instead, weddings were rituals that relied, in part, on the legitimacy of tradition and memory in order to work. The white wedding commemorated the past and created a point of orientation for the future, locating participants in a seamless timeline and thus grounding the transformation of women in something larger than themselves. In the early twentieth century, the appeal of tradition was explicitly drawn upon by a burgeoning wedding industry, but there was already a precedent for associating weddings with history. In the nineteenth century, the histories of individuals,

¹⁴⁸ Beecher, "Wedding Bazaars," 5.

symbols and practices themselves were interwoven in wedding practices in subtle but expanding ways.

Americans became more interested in history in large part because of a huge Western European (and especially German) intellectual shift towards thinking of human life as best understood as a “series of events unfolding uniquely in historical time.”¹⁴⁹ As a result, as John Gillis has argued, the Victorian middle class valued the past as no one else before them had. Their proclivity to collect antiques and preserve memorabilia – while possible because of the creation of middle-class leisure – provides some of the basis for our modern tendency to ground the present in a reassuring narrative of the past.¹⁵⁰ Thus not only was it important for the daughters of Queen Victoria to wear the same lace (Honiton) in their bridal attire as their mother, it was also considered meaningful when women not of aristocratic heritage married in a way that honored the past.

When brides wore heirloom clothing, carried family mementos, or included wedding practices with known histories, they honored multiple “traditions,” and situated their own wedding days in a larger context. For example, in one 1868 short story a bride-to-be (who is described as “romantic and fanciful”) insisted on wearing an older aunt’s yellowing wedding dress, causing a disapproving relative to complain that she would look “like one of her great-grandmothers stepped down from those dingy old frames in the hall.”¹⁵¹ In other contexts, an interest in weddings was something associated with older or more traditional women. In an 1856 letter, a woman from Cherokee County, Georgia wrote her niece begging for an account of her daughter’s recent wedding – “[h]ow many guests you had, how the bride was

¹⁴⁹ Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1988), 170.

¹⁵⁰ John R. Gillis, "Our Imagined Families: The Myths and Rituals We Live By," (Atlanta: The Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life 2002).

¹⁵¹ Elizabeth Bigelow, "Maude Vanderlyn's Bridal Dress," *Ballou's Monthly Magazine*, March 1868, 258.

dressed, how many handsome presents she had, etc.” These details, she explained, interested “your Cherokee aunt and cousins, who are so old-fashioned.”¹⁵² Weddings were often spoken of as ways of connecting women to what had come before: to the “old fashioned” past.

Yet it also became more common to explicitly attempt to create an experience that would survive in the years ahead. There was an increased sense that one’s wedding was something that would be recalled and acknowledged in the future as a joyful memory. The wedding anniversary, or the ritual celebration of the calendar date of one’s wedding day, became something that everyday people started to take note of as a family holiday. In the 1850s, newspapers began regularly reporting on the “silver” or “golden” weddings of prominent couples, celebrations marking twenty-fifth and fiftieth anniversaries, respectively. Often these celebrations included recreations of the wedding itself – or at least the gathering of as many of the original participants as possible. One 1859 Georgia golden wedding included a blessing by the original clergyman – as well as “magnificently frosted” cakes with the names of the bride and groom, the original attendants, the clergyman, and the couple’s children.¹⁵³ Just as the original wedding date was associated with the color white, the silver and gold weddings were celebrated with gifts made of silver and gold. With some satirical disapproval, the *New York Times* noted in 1851 that some New Yorkers were celebrating “tin weddings,” or the fifth wedding anniversary, giving one another gifts made entirely of tin.¹⁵⁴ (Of course by the twentieth century, the wedding industry would assign a gift theme – paper, wood, copper – to nearly every anniversary celebrated by a married couple.)

¹⁵² Eliza Greene Robarts, "Letter from Eliza Greene Robarts to Susan Mary Jones Maxwell Cumming, June 23, 1856," in *The Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War*, ed. Robert M. Myers (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 222.

¹⁵³ "A Golden Wedding Extraordinary," *Macon Weekly Telegraph*, February 22, 1859.

¹⁵⁴ "Tin Weddings," *The New York Times*, February 2 1856.

In Victorian discourse, weddings were linked to memory and the past in at least one other way, too. Victorian weddings and their associated symbols – particularly the bridal gown – came to represent youth and purity, and a particular moment on the life course. The juxtaposition of the symbol of the bride with symbols of death, aging, and decay became a favorite nineteenth-century image, both in literature and in popular imagination. This contrast between youth and age, innocence and experience, unspoiled virginity and putrid decay, seems to have been a dichotomy with real appeal. It could be presented as deeply poignant and tragic but also as something gothically spooky and entertaining.¹⁵⁵ Nineteenth century Anglo-American popular literature abounds with tales of brides who were murdered on their wedding days or of ghosts wearing tattered bridal veils in the moonlight. Jilted brides who pined into death or old age were also favorites. For example, the jilted bride Miss Havisham from Charles Dickens' 1861 *Great Expectations*, a popular novel in the United States at the time, refuses to remove her decrepit wedding dress as she grows older. Dickens said that “the bride within the bridal dress had withered like the dress, and like the flowers, and had no brightness left but the brightness of her sunken eyes.” This bride is reduced to nothing but “waxwork” and “skeleton.” Even her great bride-cake, never touched, rots on a table, and is overrun with spiders.¹⁵⁶ Other brides are struck down at their most supremely happy moment. In an 1859 ghost story from the American West, a mysterious and vindictive former suitor poisoned a beautiful bride on her wedding day. The guests from her merry wedding turned into mourners, who by “a solemn funeral procession wound slowly through that mourning village, following that lovely bride and her noble husband to their last dark

¹⁵⁶ Charles Dickens and Charlotte Mitchell, *Great Expectations*, *Penguin Classics* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 82, 83.

and narrow home.”¹⁵⁷ The bride’s happiness, which should have been cherished in years to come, was cut short too soon.

Middle-class women were sometimes buried in their wedding gowns: a practice with roots in the Christian admonition to greet death with your “wedding garments” on and also something considered emotionally moving and fitting by Victorian mourners because it represented the deceased’s hopeful youth and happiness. While preparing a young mother’s corpse for burial in 1864, Mollie Sanford came across the woman’s wedding day attire and used it to dress her body and arrange her hair. The late woman’s husband was touched: “[W]here did you find those things? She looks like she did when she was a bride.” Sanford noted in her journal that she felt she had been guided by the dead woman’s “sweet spirit” to make this kind of “wonderful transformation” of the corpse.¹⁵⁸ The wedding day represented a time so special and joyful in the life course of a woman that this was the way mourners wanted to remember her after she had died.

In sum, before the middle of the nineteenth century, there was not a consistent or homogenous notion of what was sacred, divine or transformative about a wedding day in the United States. The Victorian white wedding, although never operating entirely outside of Protestantism, became the accepted form for middle-class Americans and involved emerging notions of the sacred that were both distinct from and embedded in traditional Christianity. White weddings drew upon the sacred in two general ways: first, they appealed to themes that had a transcendent status for nineteenth-century Americans: the family, romantic love, the march of the life course and history. Second, they permitted women to experience the

¹⁵⁷ Emerson Bennett, "The Poisoned Bride," in *Wild Scenes on the Frontiers, or Heroes of the West* (Philadelphia: Hamelin & Co., 1859), 168.

¹⁵⁸ Sanford, "Diary of Mollie Dorsey Sanford, February, 1864," 181.

sacred, identifying them with a new, lofty position as “priestess” of the home and True Womanhood. This was done in part to ease the anxieties associated with marriage for middle class women but also because the wedding day was viewed as an improving and uplifting event for women, something of both sentimental and moral value for them for years to come.

Behind all of these transcendent themes and notions of the bride’s transformation looms the marketplace. Weddings did not become more elaborate and expensive *solely* because of ideologies about gender, family, love or tradition. Middle-class Americans also treated the beginning of marriage differently because of market-generated shifts in attitudes towards consumption and the role it could play in ritual and marking special occasions. Romantic love, family, ideal womanhood and tradition all were values that depended, in some respect, on the buying of symbolic objects. Because the white wedding was one place where these values came together and drew upon one another, it was a ritual that became especially celebrated through and by consumption. In the twentieth century, as modern marketers were able to target ever-larger audiences, this became even more pronounced.¹⁵⁹

The rise of practices of wedding consumption was initially something troubling to observers in the nineteenth century. In 1876, one Massachusetts writer mocked the “latest novelty in church weddings,” the special designation of a room in the church as a dressing room for the bride and her attendants, complete with mirrors, hair pins and other cosmetic aids. A step in the right direction, surely, he wrote satirically, but why not a similar room for

¹⁵⁹ Rothman, *Hands and Hearts : A History of Courtship in America*, 167-68. Rothman connects the display of wedding gifts with conspicuous consumption. But gifts need not be exclusively viewed a means of displaying wealth to others, but also a way of paying homage to the ideal home. When guests are asked to look at displayed gifts, they are invited to enter into an act of imagination about the new couple’s beautiful home, with its beautiful silver, the gilded mirrors on the wall, the lovely linens on the table. They are asked to enter into the process of furnishing and decorating a new home, something that can be deeply pleasurable and even moving, particularly for women. The controversy over wedding gifts and their significance is explored further in chapter three.

the groom, perhaps with a barber kept on staff? And if “a small space in the organ loft could be allotted to the sale of neckties and other lighter articles of gentleman’s wear,” he wrote, then we would really be getting somewhere. To this writer, it seemed ridiculous to assign rooms in the “sacred edifice” for what was obviously frivolous and crassly commercial, the costuming of a bride on her wedding day.¹⁶⁰

But by the twentieth century, the propriety of places of worship setting aside a “bride’s room” – a room off the sanctuary for the bride to dress in her elaborate white gown, a moment usually documented by photographers – was hardly seen as controversial or even worthy of discussion. By the turn of the nineteenth century, the wedding continued to develop as a rite of family, love, and memory – but particularly noticeable was its evolution into an increasingly self-conscious theatrical ritual that depended on the marketplace.

¹⁶⁰“Dressing Rooms for Church Weddings,” *Massachusetts Ploughman and New England Journal of Agriculture*, December 13 1873, 4.

CHAPTER THREE: Performing the wedding day, 1880-1920

The music, the scent of the lilies on the altar, the vision of the cloud of tulle and orange-blossoms floating nearer and nearer, the sight of Mrs. Archer's face suddenly convulsed with happy sobs, the low benedictory murmur of the Rector's voice, the ordered evolutions of the eight pink bridesmaids and the eight black ushers: all these sights, sounds and sensations, so familiar in themselves, so unutterably strange and meaningless in his new relation to them, were confusedly mingled in his brain.

-- Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, 1920¹⁶¹

In 1922, the Episcopal Church was worried about marriage. Like other mainline Protestant groups, the Episcopal Church had voiced a steady drumbeat of concern about the increasing number of American divorces since the 1860s and had been debating its canon law on the subject of the remarriage of divorced church members for several decades. At the General Convention in 1922, the topic of marriage came up in several resolutions, all of which posed different possible solutions to the problem. One recommended that the church support a national waiting period for marriage; one argued that the church print the canon law on marriage and divorce in the Book of Common Prayer so that there would be no confusion about the church's position; and one urged state and federal authorities to regulate marriage for those who were "physically or mentally defective."¹⁶²

Another resolution, ultimately passed, pointed to a lack of respect for the wedding itself, which manifested itself in the fad of "mock marriages," or "Tom Thumb weddings." On the surface, it might seem like a petty topic for denominational-level deliberation. Mock marriages were popular entertainments among churches and community groups from the 1890s until well into the twentieth century.¹⁶³ A mock marriage was a simulation or performance of a wedding; it might be a reverse or same-sex marriage, for playful or comic

¹⁶¹ Edith Wharton, *The Age of Innocence*, (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1920), 185.

¹⁶² *Journal of the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America 1922*, (New York: Abbott Press, 1923), 114.

¹⁶³ Among the African American middle class and throughout the south, the Tom Thumb wedding seems to have remained fairly common until at least the 1950s, with a few more contemporary examples.

effect – or it might be a more solemn pageant put on by young people, usually to showcase clothing and decorations. The Tom Thumb wedding was specifically enacted by children, almost always younger than nine years old but sometimes younger than three. Such events could be exaggerations, subverting and poking fun at the white wedding ritual, but in many cases there was also an underlying reverence for the ritual involved, especially when the performances were organized or enacted by women. But the General Convention of the Episcopal Church – in the midst of debates over the precise meaning of its rites and which rites counted among its sacraments – was not interested in condoning such “unseemly or jesting imitation of the Marriage Service,” even in the name of raising money for a parish. Decrying the “too general irreverence of our age” and the “disregard of the dignity and sanctity of Holy Wedlock,” the General Convention’s resolution discouraged Episcopal parishes from using such wedding pageants as fundraisers.¹⁶⁴

What do these amateur performances of weddings – and the disapproval they provoked in some quarters – suggest about how the wedding was viewed as an experience of the sacred in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries? For one, the fascination and worry about weddings reveals something of the context of anxiety about marriage, divorce and the state of the family, which, it will be suggested here, gave the wedding more importance and legitimated its ever-increasing complexity and expense. The mock marriages themselves point to the continued gendered nature of the white wedding, which tended to invite meticulous reproduction when imitated by women and exaggeration when performed by men. Although cultural expectations for middle-class women and families were changing at the turn of the twentieth century, the white wedding continued to be a distinctively feminine practice: a ritual for and about women, brought about by female expertise. The fad

¹⁶⁴ *Journal of the General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America* 1922, 336.

for mock marriages also indicates that the white wedding was hardening into a script, something so elaborate, theatrical and predictable that it could be “performed” as a piece of entertainment, for fun or for money. Finally, the alarm of the Episcopal church over the mock wedding – and particularly over its connection to a broader lack of respect for the institution of marriage – suggests how a mainline Protestant worry about divorce rates led to a new emphasis on the solemn importance of church weddings in the United States, even as a few observers critiqued weddings that were too big and too expensive.

The previous chapter discussed those themes with sacred resonance that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century white wedding, including a special reverence for home, romantic love, and historical narrative. This chapter argues that the late nineteenth and early twentieth century wedding continued to rely upon these themes but also became increasingly scripted, performative and symbolically charged, with a greater role for consumption. Because of these changes in the ritual, it became ever more important that weddings were rooted in continuity and tradition. In the first section below, I will show through an examination of popular performances and parodies of white weddings – which both reified and perpetuated the white wedding form – that the question of what made a wedding efficacious and authentic was in flux and a subject of some fascination and anxiety. In the second section, we will see how questions about authenticity were fuelled by the uncertainty associated with changes in American middle-class family life – about divorce, but also about changing expectations about romantic love and marriage, about new roles for women, and about shifting relationships between children and parents. In this context of change in gender and family roles, the white wedding preserved its mid-nineteenth century form but became increasingly more elaborate and tied to the marketplace, helped by a proliferation of wedding etiquette and guidebooks, as discussed in the third section below. This elaboration could

cause the wedding day to appear to be a complex “show” from multiple perspectives. In the fourth section below, I examine the criticism of purchasing and receiving wedding presents, items that could be either cherished as symbols of generosity and meaningful relationships – or as emblems of vain, conspicuous consumption. Even the critics of lavish spending, it is suggested here, helped to give legitimacy to the sentimental importance of buying consumer items for the wedding day. Finally, in the fifth section we turn to the way that brides and their families, aided by the marketplace, continued to emphasize that the wedding day was unchanging and sacred, consisting of a set of powerful “invented traditions”¹⁶⁵ and conduits of memory that drew upon the pull of tradition. In this period, female ritual experts, increasingly aided by the marketplace, shaped a theatrical wedding ritual that some called extravagant, but one that emphasized the power of continuity, tradition and memory. In the following chapter, we will ask why American churches so rarely challenged the more elaborate ritual – and in some cases tacitly endorsed it.

Mock marriages and Tom Thumb weddings: white weddings as entertainments

Tom Thumb wedding performances of the late nineteenth century were inspired by one couple’s actual wedding: the 1863 marriage of Charles Stratton to Lavinia Warren at Grace Church in New York City. Stratton, better known by his stage name “General Tom Thumb,” and Warren, the “Queen of Beauty,” were well-known little people and performers at the American Museum, the commercial attraction run by the showman Phineas T. Barnum. The wedding initiated a real, twenty-year marriage, which ended with Charles Stratton’s death. But the wedding was also a spectacle, attended by hundreds of sightseers

¹⁶⁵ This term, elaborated on more fully in this chapter, comes from the work of Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. See Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 4.

and read about in newspapers and magazines by thousands more. The size of the bride and groom, as well as the little people who served as bridesmaid and best man, created the impression, according to the *New York Herald*, that the event was being “seen through the small end of an opera glass.”¹⁶⁶ Although no admission was charged to the wedding itself (the reception was another story), the event was managed by Barnum and took advantage of every opportunity to contrast the size of the bride, groom and their attendants with their grandiose surroundings. The bride, who wore a smaller version of an elaborate white satin dress with hoops and a long, fashionable train, arrived at the church in a miniature carriage. The street outside the church was so crowded with spectators that the police had to intervene.¹⁶⁷ Photographs were taken of the average-sized rector, in surplice, reading the vows to the bride and groom, who stood as tall as his waist. The *New York Times* reported that at the reception at the Metropolitan Hotel, the couple displayed their many costly gifts (including an “elegantly carved” miniature billiards table) and stood on top of a grand piano to greet thousands of guests.¹⁶⁸ Many spectators were charmed by the nuptials, but there were those who were skeptical of the event. That the wedding had occurred in a religious setting and was officiated by an Episcopal clergyman raised some eyebrows. A writer in the *New York Herald* commented sarcastically that Grace Church made “a magnificent addition to the American Museum.”¹⁶⁹ This lavish white wedding in miniature was a source of fascination, but its authenticity as a ritual with religious significance was in question.

Over the next few decades, this celebrity wedding became the basis for intentionally inauthentic miniature weddings: the Tom Thumb wedding program as popular community

¹⁶⁶ "The Tom Thumb Wedding," *The New York Herald* 1863, 1.

¹⁶⁷ *Tom Thumb Wedding* (Theatre Museum, National Museum of the Performing Arts, [cited May 21 2008]); available from http://www.peopleplayuk.org.uk/guided_tours/circus_tour/circus_performers/thumb.php.

¹⁶⁸ "The Loving Lilliputians: Warren-Thumbiana," *The New York Times*, February 11 1863, 8.

¹⁶⁹ "The Tom Thumb Wedding," 1.

entertainment, with children portraying the main roles. Occasionally these pageants aimed to literally represent the Stratton-Warren marriage, casting children as Stratton, Warren and Barnum, but in most cases, they were simply an enactment of any elaborate white wedding with small children, intended to be charming. In 1892, the *Ladies' Home Journal* published, for its female readership, precise directions for carrying out this “unique and picturesque festival” for children age four to eight. “The idea is to reproduce, as nearly as possible, the interesting features of a ceremonious wedding,” the article explained. Directions included costuming for the wedding party (the fathers of the bride and groom are advised to “whiten their locks, since baldness cannot be conveniently managed”), the order of procession, and a diagram showing how the children should stand.¹⁷⁰ Smaller children were often selected to play the roles of the flower girl and ring bearer or page, and a boy would be cast as the clergyman. Prominent guests were sometimes impersonated, too; at one 1906 Tom Thumb wedding at a Congregationalist church in Washington D.C., children “attending” the wedding were costumed as President and Mrs. Roosevelt, as well as the Vice President, Speaker of the House, and the Chinese minister and his wife.¹⁷¹

The appeal of the Tom Thumb wedding program was the enjoyment of a diligent, smaller scale recreation of a familiar form. Children were usually encouraged to take the event seriously. When the *Atlanta Constitution* covered a Tom Thumb wedding in 1913, the article commended the participants (including a two-year old bride, and a 23-month old maid-of-honor) for being “wonderfully trained,” and for performing “with dignity and grace.”¹⁷² In a Tom Thumb wedding, the white wedding was itself faithfully imitated – except for that, as one North Carolina newspaper commented about a local performance in

¹⁷⁰ "A Tom Thumb Wedding Fete," *The Ladies' Home Journal*, October 1892, 10.

¹⁷¹ "Children Entertain. Tom Thumb Wedding Produced at Mount Pleasant Church," *The Washington Post*, November 28 1906, 12.

¹⁷² "The Tom Thumb Wedding," *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 27 1913, C2.

1897, “the combined ages of the entire bridal party, including that of the youthful clergyman, would hardly aggregate the years of an ordinary bride and groom.”¹⁷³

These miniature weddings, as Susan Stewart argues in *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir*, exaggerated and amplified the ideal, creating exquisite small-scale replicas of a ritual. They were homage, not satire. Along the same lines, an annual mock marriage pageant among the all-female undergraduates at Florida State College for Women in the 1920s carefully recreated the white wedding form (IMAGES 2 and 3). Every year, a group of juniors was selected to play the groom and groomsmen, and a group of seniors to play the bride and bridesmaids, all in elaborate wedding costume. The women playing the role of the men wore formal suits and were photographed standing legs astride, their hands in the pockets of their slacks, broad smiles on their faces. There were also photographs of the bride and groom facing one another in a coy admiration and the entire wedding party posing for a formal portrait in front of a pipe organ, two women kneeling to portray the young flower girl and ringbearer. There was a playful quality to these photographs – particularly in the women’s winking performance of masculinity – but these college students were serious when it came to reproducing the white wedding form. Their clothes were plausible imitations of wedding costumes, not exaggerated or skewed for comic effect. (There were, for example, no comic false mustaches or padded shoulders.) The hair of those portraying both men and women was meticulously arranged, and their bouquets and corsages elaborate, representing significant preparation. Photographs of the women portraying the bride and bridesmaids were indistinguishable from photographs of an actual

¹⁷³ "The "Tom Thumb Wedding", " *The News and Observer*, March 15 1896, 5.

wedding. Any gentle subversion of the white wedding form accomplished by eliminating men from the ritual was couched in expressions of devotion to it.¹⁷⁴

But some mock marriages – and even some Tom Thumb weddings – were less reverent. In the same 1890s-1930s time period during which Tom Thumb weddings flourished, “womanless weddings” enjoyed some popularity in Anglo- and African-American church communities, with men dressing up as all the roles, donning oversized long dresses, veils and floppy straw hats, and caricaturing the bride and her mother. A mock marriage enacted by men was a “carnival grotesque exaggeration of the wedding,” something that both acknowledged the existence of the ritual formula and distorted it for comic effect.¹⁷⁵ A “womanless wedding” in Atlanta in 1918, conducted by prominent community leaders as a wartime benefit for the Red Cross, included a “six foot bride” and “cute little flower ‘girls’ tripping along the aisle in number seven shoes.”¹⁷⁶ One letter to the editor in *The Living Church* in 1888 described a Tom Thumb wedding at a Methodist church that concluded with the enactment of a campy divorce trial, with children comically portraying the roles of divorce lawyers. “To what complexion has religion come,” complained the letter’s author, “when to support it the innocence of children must be corrupted and taught to personate upon the stage the low sensations of the secular press!”¹⁷⁷ This kind of apparent mockery of marriage was precisely what the delegates at the Episcopal General Convention in 1922 were worried about.

At least when children or same-sex groups were participating in mock marriages, the question of whether or not the wedding was binding was moot. When young people of

¹⁷⁴ Dorothy Dodd, *All-Female Wedding at Florida State College for Women* (Tallahassee, Florida: Florida Historical Society).

¹⁷⁵ Susan Stewart, *On Longing : Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, 1st paperback ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 119.

¹⁷⁶ “Leading Atlantans to Pose as Women in Unique Wedding,” *Atlanta Constitution*, April 7 1918, 4.

¹⁷⁷ “Mock Marriages,” *The Living Church*, June 9 1888, 152.

marriageable age and of mixed gender held mock weddings, a new layer of anxiety surrounded the practice, rooted in a seemingly pervasive uncertainty about whose authority it was that made a wedding “work.” During the original Tom Thumb wedding, some wondered whether the couple’s real wedding was in fact only a performance, but in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, some worried whether performance weddings were inadvertently real. In the 1880s and 1890s, newspapers nationwide reported regularly stories in which mock marriages, performed as merry and jesting entertainments by young people, turned out tragically to be legally binding. In one such case in 1881, young people in Michigan participated in a mock marriage “to furnish amusement” for guests at a party, only to find that:

the joke took a rather grim appearance the next day, when a legal friend informed them that they were as legally married as though a minister had performed the ceremony, as the laws of Michigan did not require any particular form, but simply requires that the contracting parties shall announce their matrimonial intention in the presence of witnesses.¹⁷⁸

Having assumed that it was a minister that made a wedding, the young people failed to realize that a wedding was a legal proceeding, and that enacting certain ritual steps would create a marriage regardless of intent. Mock marriages seemed to provoke these questions and insecurities. “One is at a loss to understand,” bemoaned one editorial in the *New York Times*, “what must be the mental character of a girl who will go through with the ceremony of marriage ‘in fun’ with a young man with whom she has had no previous acquaintance.”¹⁷⁹ Complicating matters further, the term “mock marriage” was also used by the press to describe the sham ceremony conducted when a man misled a woman into believing they were getting married, perhaps recruiting someone to impersonate a clergyman, in order to convince her to have a sexual relationship. This kind of mock marriage, involving clear

¹⁷⁸ “Mock Marriage,” *Christian Advocate*, April 7 1881, 220.

¹⁷⁹ “Married in Fun,” *The New York Times*, October 27 1883.

deception of a woman in order to compromise her purity, was condemned across the board – but was also frequently and sensationally reported in American newspapers.¹⁸⁰

What to make of all of these imitations and subversions, of two-year old grooms and six-foot brides, of staged rituals that were real and of real rituals that were staged? Weddings in this period were now commonly talked about in the language of performance, which had at least two implications: that white weddings now had a largely scripted and formalized set of ritual ingredients, and that the proliferation of customs and etiquette about weddings seemed sometimes to smack of vain excess, which in turn raised questions about their authenticity. The mock wedding reflected gendered attitudes towards the wedding day, which could be seen by women as a way to showcase feminine creativity, beauty, status and purity, and by men as a wasteful “show.” The mock wedding (and those who worried about it) also expressed a devotion to and anxiety about the burgeoning consumer marketplace. Finally, the mock wedding was also a way to both venerate and satirize the family, and a special concern for the changes in American family life, especially the rise of divorce, fuelled its critics, who saw mock weddings as indicative of a casual attitude towards marriage.

So long as ye both shall live: shifting notions of family

In 1901, the *Boston Daily Globe* ran a story about a cynical salesman complaining that couples were not celebrating anniversaries as they once did. “The average couple is divorced and married over again to somebody else by the time they reach the tin wedding period,” the man claimed. “Naturally, this excess of matrimonial activity is inimical to the wedding

¹⁸⁰ See, for example: “Mock Marriage,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 19 1879, 6., “Fouly Wed. A Mock Marriage, a Broken Heart, and a Dishonorable Death -- the Work of a Villian.,” *The National Police Gazette* 1880, 6., “A Mock Marriage. How a Farmer's Daughter Was Deluded by a Horse Thief,” *New York Times*, March 3 1889, 8., “By a Mock Marriage. Mary Wingetts Tells a Startling Story of How She Was Deceived. Her Alleged Betrayer under Arrest.,” *Atlanta Constitution*, August 16 1895, 5.

anniversary industry.”¹⁸¹ He was exaggerating the prevalence of divorce in 1901. Nevertheless, between 1870 and 1924, the rate of divorce per capita in the United States did increase 540%,¹⁸² and by 1924 one marriage out of every seven ended in divorce.¹⁸³ In a culture in which marriage was commonly spoken of as the linchpin to morality, stability and happiness, this was a profoundly troubling trend. A special committee on the question of marriage in the Episcopal Church in 1886 linked the continuation of traditional marriage to no less than the “security and peace of every household in the land, to the stability of the social system, to the progress of mankind in civilization, and to the transmission of the principles of righteousness and religion to future generations.”¹⁸⁴ At around the turn of the twentieth century, reformers from the mainline Protestant churches, along with a group of like-minded educators and politicians, spearheaded a movement to create national marriage and divorce laws, eliminating the differences in marriage statutes from state to state.¹⁸⁵ This reform, it was assumed, would help to curb the tide of divorces, instituting a standard waiting period that would eliminate hasty, ill-advised marriages and making divorce more difficult for those who would dissolve their marriages on a whim. Lax divorce laws permitted a kind of “consecutive polygamy,” as was argued by the bishops the 1908 General Conference of the Methodist church, which constituted “a disgrace to our country.”¹⁸⁶ In

¹⁸¹ “Wedding Anniversaries,” *Boston Daily Globe*, October 20 1901.

¹⁸² Ernest R. Mowrer, *Family Disorganization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927), 38. in Darryl W. Stephens, “A Witness of Words : The United Methodist Social Principles as Moral Discourse and Institutional Practice” (dissertation (Ph.D.), Emory University, 2006), 5.

¹⁸³ Steven Mintz and Susan Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions : A Social History of American Family Life* (New York: Free Press Collier Macmillan, 1988), 109.

¹⁸⁴ *Journal of the Proceedings of the Bishops, Clergy and Laity of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America, Assembled in a General Convention, Held in the City of Chicago, from October 6 to October 28, Inclusive, in the Year of Our Lord 1886*, (Chicago: 1887), 783.

¹⁸⁵ Stephens, “A Witness of Words : The United Methodist Social Principles as Moral Discourse and Institutional Practice”, 6.; Nancy F. Cott, *Public Vows : A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 109,10.

¹⁸⁶ “The Episcopal Address,” in *Journal of the Twenty-Fifth Delegated General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church Held in Baltimore, Maryland, May6-June1, 1908*, ed. Joseph B. Hingeley

some large measure, public discussion of the marriage rite in this period was framed by fears of this looming problem of divorce, something that will be explored further in chapter four.

But the rise of divorce was not the only change in American family life that affected the question of marriage in this period. The creation of new opportunities for independence for middle-class women, the spread of a new companionate ideal of romantic love, and a shift in parent-child relationships changed how women viewed getting married and how their lives would be changed as wives. These changes did not inhibit the practice of the white wedding. Despite (or perhaps because of) these changes, the white wedding continued to spread as a widely shared middle-class ideal and was still tightly associated with many of the same constellation of symbols and meanings it had acquired earlier in the nineteenth century. To some extent, the white wedding continued to be viewed as an initiation of brides into a new position of domestic authority – although some worried that contemporary women lacked the requisite domestic skills for this responsibility. Description of and prescription for white weddings still emphasized the bride's presumed purity and beauty. Romantic love continued to be spoken of as a crucial and somewhat mysterious ingredient for an authentic wedding day – but it was an increasingly complex notion, viewed as necessarily involving a careful balance of friendship, emotional intimacy and sexual compatibility. These changes in the meanings associated with the white wedding ritual were subtle, but as will be discussed in the following section, they had an impact on both the practice of the ritual itself and its significance within Christian communities.

Middle-class women in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century had a different vantage point on relationships with men than their mothers had. In this period, it was far more likely for young middle-class women to have already shared activities and

(New York: Eaton & Mains, 1908), 133. in Stephens, "A Witness of Words : The United Methodist Social Principles as Moral Discourse and Institutional Practice", 6.

experiences in common with their male counterparts and to have many friendships and casual acquaintances with men their own age. One reason for this was the growth of industry and the creation of some respectable jobs for women, notably teaching, but the growth of female attendance of educational institutions as students seems to have had the most profound effect. After the Civil War, the growth of public high schools meant that girls were now more likely to attend school and participate in extracurricular activities with boys until they were of marriageable age. Between 1890 and 1910, the number of women who attended college tripled, and the number doubled again before 1920.¹⁸⁷ By the 1910s and 1920s, college education was a crucial catalyst in the emergence of a new ideal of femininity, the “New Woman” – and later the notorious “flapper.” Assertive, independent, sexualized and seeking out her own enjoyment, the New Woman also happened to be interested in buying things for herself, which would have implications for the white wedding too.¹⁸⁸

Another effect of these rising levels of higher education seems to have been a slowdown in marriage altogether. Historian of courtship Ellen Rothman has noted that of women born between 1860 and 1880 (those who would be of marrying age between the late 1870s and 1910) 11 percent did not marry at all, which is the highest percentage in American history. The percentage of those who never married was even higher among those women who were college-educated.¹⁸⁹ Earlier in the century, middle-class women were often hesitant to marry because of the fear of separation from their families, but this issue came up less often in the late nineteenth century. Some women decided not to marry because they simply enjoyed the freedoms that came with living on their own and were able to find other sources of personal satisfaction in work, study or activism. Ellen Rothman pointed out that some

¹⁸⁷ Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions : A Social History of American Family Life*, 111.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts : A History of Courtship in America* (New York: Basic Books inc., 1984), 249.

women began to see teaching or writing not as a temporary occupation to occupy them while waiting to be wives and mothers, but as careers. In an era when married middle-class women rarely worked, career women “were more likely to see marriage as bringing an end to something they enjoyed.”¹⁹⁰

Another reason for leering about marriage, which seems to have been encouraged by education, was the widespread belief that women were naturally more moral and pure than men. Women were encouraged to police the sexual impulses of men while they were single, and then, once married, to encourage them to temper their baser instincts with culture, religion and morality. But some women worried about relinquishing their agency to a husband, given the many apparent moral shortcomings associated with the other gender. In 1882, at age seventeen, school-oriented Maud Rittenhouse worried that her friend Mamie’s fiancé was not worthy of her hand in marriage:

He doesn't drink or smoke, is a member of the church and is very ambitious. But I don't want anybody but an upright down-right angel to marry dear sweet pretty "Maimee". I am beginning to agree with Shelly in thinking matrimony an outrageous institution. I wish girls wouldn't get married.

To further emphasize her point, Rittenhouse continued by quoting a line from a comic operetta: ““They taught me at the Convent, men were very wicked things, And that Young-ladies were but angels without wings.””¹⁹¹ In 1899, Elizabeth Channing suggested that religion, and not family, ought to be the center of women’s lives and argued that there ought to be a new clause in the marriage service that specified ““I promise to love and honor – if you go with me to church’ ... for I tremble for my country, as I mark the indifference of

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Isabella Maud Rittenhouse Mayne, "Diary of Isabella Maud Rittenhouse Mayne, June, 1882," in *Maud*, ed. Richard Lee (New York: Macmillan & Company, 1939), 109-10.

men to public worship.”¹⁹² Moral goodness, one tenet of the ideal of True Womanhood, was still a characteristic associated with femininity in the early twentieth century (and later, too, New Woman or no). But some women, empowered by education and new economic opportunities, seemed to push the logic of this ideology further: if women were morally superior to men, why should they voluntarily enter into a binding relationship in which men had legal, economic and cultural authority over them?

The presumed moral superiority of women to men also fueled social movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As scholars of women’s history have observed, one centerpiece of the argument for women’s suffrage was that society *needed* the influence of women outside of the home. If male impurity was the source of social problems like drunkenness, prostitution and poverty, there was a pressing reason for women to have influence in the public sphere, to correct for the tendency towards intemperance in men, and to encourage men to come up to the level of women. As was the case with the ideal of the Cult of True Womanhood, women could find solidarity and social power in this discourse. This same sense of social power was part of what was reflected in the symbolism of purity, beauty and goodness of the white wedding ritual.¹⁹³

Romantic love, that otherworldly force associated with the mid-century white wedding, was also an evolving ideal. The new patterns of relationships between men and women – particularly, it seems, the interactions they had in co-educational institutions – affected young people’s expectations for a love match. More than ever, romantic love was viewed as an essential ingredient for a marriage. (Some, like Mary Maclane in 1901, spoke of it as the *only* authentic requirement for a marriage: “When a man and a woman love one

¹⁹²Elizabeth Parsons Channing, "Diary of Elizabeth Parsons Channing, May, 1899," in *Autobiography and Diary of Elizabeth Parsons Channing: Gleanings of a Thoughtful Life* (Boston, MA: American Unitarian Association, 1907), 304.

¹⁹³Rothman, *Hands and Hearts : A History of Courtship in America*, 186-89.

another that is enough. That is marriage. A religious rite is superfluous. And if the man and woman live together without the love, no ceremony in the world can make it marriage.”¹⁹⁴)

But romantic love itself was becoming an increasingly complicated notion. Men and women began to speak less about a woman’s domestic ability or a man’s ability to provide (although these were never irrelevant), and more about partners to whom they could relate as companions, counselors and friends, who could meet multiple emotional, physical and psychological needs. Both partners looked more and more to their spouses for personal fulfillment – including, by the 1910s and 1920s, *mutual* sexual fulfillment – a decidedly controversial notion even fifty years before. In the 1880s, Elizabeth Cady Stanton asserted “the great natural fact that a healthy woman has as much passion as a man, that she needs nothing stronger than the law of attraction to draw her to the male.”¹⁹⁵ By the first decades of the twentieth century, she had support among a growing number of psychologists and medical doctors, who began to make claims that a “vigorous and harmonious sex life” – for both husband and wife – was essential to a happy marriage.¹⁹⁶ By 1920, the lyrics to a popular song, “Love, Honor and O-Baby,” linked a groom’s excitement about his upcoming wedding day with a frank anticipation of the wedding night: “We’ll cuddle and squeeze / And put out the light – Of course I could say more but then it wouldn’t be right.”¹⁹⁷

Nevertheless, a majority of women were not particularly comfortable admitting or discussing expectations about sex, even with their daughters; in 1922, a survey showed that half of educated women had received no instruction about sex by anyone.¹⁹⁸ In any case, a good

¹⁹⁴ Mary Maclane, "Diary of Mary Maclane, January, 1901," in *The Story of Mary Maclane* (Chicago: H.S. Stone, 1902), 322.

¹⁹⁵ Alice S. Rossi, ed., *The Feminist Papers: From Adams to De Beauvoir* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988), 393.

¹⁹⁶ Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions : A Social History of American Family Life*, 115.

¹⁹⁷ James F. Hanley, Joe Goodwin and Murray Roth, *Love Honor and O-Baby* (New York: Shapiro, Bernstein & Company, 1920), 4.

¹⁹⁸ Mintz and Kellogg, *Domestic Revolutions : A Social History of American Family Life*, 116.

love relationship was becoming a multifaceted ideal, freighted with expectations, even when they were not widely articulated. Stephanie Coontz has argued that the rising divorce rate was in fact evidence of this; as marriages became more emotionally satisfying and equitable personal relationships, they also became more vulnerable to being dissolved. (The very notion of basing a relationship on mutual satisfaction, she points out, implies any party can leave voluntarily should this satisfaction wane.)¹⁹⁹

Patriarchal models for the family were also being displaced when it came to parent-child relationships. A century before, a woman's parents (and especially her father) would expect to have some say over whom she married, but by the early twentieth century, most middle-class American parents expected their children of both sexes to choose a marriage partner on their own, without the involvement of parents. More and more – and despite many complaints on the subject – parents were losing control over their children's social (and sexual) relationships, along with the way that their children spent their leisure time. The rise of higher education, new forms of commercial entertainments and the popularization of the automobile resulted in a widespread twentieth-century change in middle-class courting customs. Rather than courting on the porch or the family parlor, young people were increasingly likely to leave the house, usually unchaperoned, to attend school functions together, to go to a dance hall or nickelodeon, or to go out for a drive in an automobile. This was the genesis of what would become known as the "date."²⁰⁰ One reflection of this change of attitude was that older patriarchal customs, like a prospective groom asking for the

¹⁹⁹ Stephanie Coontz, "Courting Trouble? The World Historic Transformation of Love and Marriage," in *MARIAL Center Colloquium* (Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia: 2007). Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History : From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005).

²⁰⁰ Rothman, *Hands and Hearts : A History of Courtship in America*, 207.

permission of the bride's father to marry her, became viewed as more of a sentimental formality than a crucial step.²⁰¹

This is not to say that parents did not voice their displeasure with their children's choices, but they often found themselves in the position of having to swallow their complaints or lose relationships with their children. After James Gillespie's daughter Sarah moved from rural Iowa to Des Moines in 1892 to work as a secretary for an insurance company, she became involved with an older man her father did not approve of. A month after her elopement, Gillespie wrote her acknowledging his limited power: "I cannot call you mine any more, I saposé [sic]," but pleading with her to write: "let me here from you oftener is the wish of one that will call blessings on you [sic]."²⁰² A mother in San Francisco reportedly took a somewhat more drastic approach in 1891 following the elopement of her teenaged daughter; she abducted the new bride and made off with her to Los Angeles, provoking the groom to track them down with a court affidavit!²⁰³ This, however, was far more the exception than the rule.

The sway that most parents did have over their children's marriage decisions – and especially mothers over their daughters – was emotional and sentimental in nature. The steady drop in average birth rates during the nineteenth century meant that middle-class women in the 1890s and 1900s raised far fewer children than their mothers and grandmothers had. At the same time, they tended to play a larger emotional role in their children's lives and more commonly developed intimate and confidential relationships with

²⁰¹ Ibid., 214, 15.

²⁰² Sarah Gillespie Huftalen, "Diary of Sarah Gillespie Huftalen, January, 1900," in *All Will yet Be Well: The Diary of Sarah Gillspie Huftalen, 1873-1952*, ed. Suzanne L. Bunkers (Iowa City, IA: University of Iowa Press, 1989), 325.

²⁰³ "Lost His Wife. A Young Husband Outwitted by His Mother-in-Law," *Los Angeles Times*, August 3 1891, 2.

their daughters lasting well into adulthood.²⁰⁴ Accordingly, many mothers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did advise and confer with their daughters about whether and whom to marry. More to the point, they became central figures in the planning and execution of weddings.²⁰⁵

The mother of the bride, always a key figure in wedding preparations for a daughter, emerged as an important ritual specialist. This prominence of the bride's mother as the final word on wedding etiquette and style was, in some respects, one way of injecting parental control back into the courtship process. (To be sure, that the bride's father typically paid for the wedding was another.) In a 1905 wedding planning guide, the role of the bride's mother was clear from the very beginning of the engagement. The engaged couple was to decide an appropriate date for the wedding, and the matter was "then deferred to the mother of the fiancée, who either approves of the choice or names a day more convenient for the ensuing and necessary details."²⁰⁶ It became common to refer to the mother of the bride as part of the wedding party, and sometimes wedding announcements in newspapers would describe what she wore, along with the attire of the bridesmaids and the bride herself. A wedding in this period might stress not only the bonds between husband and wife, but also the bonds between mother and daughter. For a bride whose mother had died, described in a short story in 1904, this aspect of the wedding day was poignant: "She was not thinking of her dress, or of her lover, or of the sacrament. An ineffable longing for a mother's blessing was choking her."²⁰⁷ The wedding day could be closely associated not only with romantic but with *maternal* love.

²⁰⁴ Rothman, *Hands and Hearts : A History of Courtship in America*, 218.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 221.

²⁰⁶ *Weddings and Wedding Anniversaries*, (New York: Butterick Publishing Company, Ltd., 1905), 14.

²⁰⁷ Herbert D. Ward, "The Bridal Mirror," *The Ladies' Home Journal*, May 1904, 7.

These changes in American middle-class family life – the rise of divorce, new notions about femininity and female independence, heightened expectations about romantic love, and the change in the nature of parental influence over the mating of their children – had multiple effects on the white wedding itself: how it was viewed, how it was practiced, and how it was prescribed. Yet none of these changes seemed to affect the importance ascribed to the ritual; indeed, they seem to have encouraged a view of the white wedding as an even more significant event. Aided by the rise of an ever-more-sophisticated marketplace aimed at selling wedding products to prospective brides and their mothers, the white wedding took on more precise, formalized layers of etiquette and necessary ritual objects and steps in this period.

“Big weddings are such terrors”²⁰⁸: continued elaboration and commercialization

In many respects the American white wedding has tended to be a conservative ritual. Although aspects of family and marital relationships were changing, many felt it was important to keep the white wedding consistent and traditional, preserving the rite itself from any surrounding cultural tremors. For example, Emily Rayner, the author of an 1895 women’s magazine article, cautioned brides against joking about divorce on one’s wedding day. She recounted an incident she had witnessed at a recent wedding. A lawyer approached the bride and, eyeing the nearby clergyman, told her jokingly: “The Rector may lead you into trouble, but I am the one to lead you out.” Although other guests laughed, Rayner felt something about the ritual had been spoiled. At a wedding, she argued, “the very suggestion of the possibility of a legal separation was amiss.” It was, in part, the notion that the couple had “bound themselves to the end of their lives” that lent “a halo of a solemn joy over every

²⁰⁸ Isabella Maud Rittenhouse Mayne, "Diary of Isabella Maud Mayne, June 1890," in *Maud*, ed. Richard Lee (New York, NY: Macmillan & Co., 1939), 516.

wedding.”²⁰⁹ To many, rising divorce rates suggested it was *more* important to emphasize the deep sacrality of romantic love and the marriage bond and the special quality of the wedding day. Cultural changes like divorce helped to make the timelessness of the white wedding seem more important, and one indication of this importance was a proliferation of rules, etiquette and necessary elements in the proper execution of a wedding. Even when these elaborations were, in fact, *changes* in wedding practice, the tendency was to continue to preserve the impression of seamless continuity with the past, connection with future generations, and the unmovable force of tradition. Sentimental parents and market entrepreneurs shared in this interest in continuity.

To be sure, there were those who quite frankly wanted to change wedding practices, perhaps even drastically, to adjust to modern sensibilities. The notion that a woman should promise to “obey” her husband as part of the wedding vows became widely unpopular among the white middle-class in the early twentieth century and was a much less common part of the wedding ceremony.²¹⁰ (This would result in the eventual omission of the promise from most mainline Protestant marriage liturgies, as will be discussed in greater depth in the following chapter.) But some women’s rights’ advocates went farther yet in calling for changes in wedding practices. In one suffrage magazine in 1891, Lucy Stone critiqued the practice of “giving the bride away.” At one time, this barbaric custom might have made sense, she argued:

But in these days, when women stand as individuals, able to hold college degrees, to carry on business, to make contracts, to serve as lawyers, clergymen and physicians, it seems the extreme of silliness and unfitness that such a person should be given away, as though she were incompetent to dispose of herself.²¹¹

²⁰⁹ Emily Rayner, "Autumnal Weddings," *The American Magazine* 1895, 129.

²¹⁰ "'Obeyists' Scarce: Women in Favor of Change in Marriage Vow Apparently in Large Majority," *New York Times*, April 23 1922, 98.

²¹¹ Lucy Stone, "Giving Away the Bride," *The Woman's Column*, May 9 1891, 1.

A few “suffragette” weddings, with self-conscious symbolism, did adjust white wedding practices – although, notably, did not eschew them altogether. At one 1903 wedding hosted by Susan B. Anthony, the officiant was female, and the bride and groom processed in together. Following the ceremony, Anthony kissed both the bride *and* groom to congratulate them.²¹² But these kinds of alterations of white wedding practices were not the norm, and indeed, were usually satirized in the press for the perceived absurdity of their subversion of traditional wedding gender roles. An 1896 article in a woman’s magazine mocked a suffragette wedding in which both bride and groom wore white. The author, describing the groom’s suit, took aim at this apparent blurring of gender roles: “Now just how was the lower half of that ‘suit’ constructed? Was it a bifurcated garment or was our New Man dressed in a flowing skirt?”²¹³ There were those who might experiment with the wedding form, but far more common was to accept and attempt to replicate practices associated with the Victorian white wedding.

Yet practices associated with the white wedding done right seemed to grow in number every year. As noted in the section above, the mother of the bride commonly began to be viewed as the ritual expert and the final arbiter of wedding etiquette and style. As historian Ellen Rothman observes:

Even couples who had been left free to find their own way to the altar were not allowed to improvise the final steps. They must observe the rules; and the more rules there were, the greater a mother’s power of enforcement. Few young people chose to fight this alliance between social custom and maternal authority.²¹⁴

²¹² “Wedding at Miss Anthony’s,” *The Woman’s standard* 1903, 2.

²¹³ Anonymous, “A “New Mans” Wedding,” *Today’s woman: a weekly home and fashion journal* 1896, 8.

²¹⁴ Rothman, *Hands and Hearts : A History of Courtship in America*, 276.

If the “rules” of a wedding seemed overwhelming to a bride or her mother, entrepreneurs were increasingly eager to provide them with resources. In the late 19th and early 20th century, a young woman planning her wedding was faced with a wide variety of wedding books and periodical articles to assist her. Such books carefully mapped out every aspect of the ordinary middle-class wedding to an extent that would have been unimaginable fifty years before. A wedding had precise rules and fashions surrounding the engagement period (“[t]he third finger of the left hand is the one on which both the engagement ring and the wedding ring are worn”)²¹⁵, the invitations (“pure white with no attempt at ornamentation”²¹⁶), the bride’s trousseau (“[i]t is better to have a very few well-made dresses of best material than many of poor material carelessly made”),²¹⁷ to the length of the wedding dress train (“[f]or a ceremonious church function a sweeping train of great length is correct”)²¹⁸ to the proper order of entry into the church (“[t]he bridesmaids stand one in advance of the other on each side of the chancel, the maid-of-honor taking her place at the left of where the bride will stand.”²¹⁹) Moreover, ideas abounded for creating a distinctively charming and creative wedding. Some guidebooks began to advocate picking a theme. One 1906 article claimed that “[a]lmost every smart wedding has a distinctive feature, which gives a name to the function” and proceeded to specify what could be done to carry out a daisy-themed wedding in particular, with “wreaths or ropes of daisies” lining the church.²²⁰ Because of the complexity now involved in the white wedding, guidebooks also began to suggest that rehearsals be organized the day before the wedding:

²¹⁵ *Weddings and Wedding Anniversaries*, 5.

²¹⁶ "Wedding Etiquette," *Boston Daily Globe*, Nov 5 1893, 31.

²¹⁷ *Weddings and Wedding Anniversaries*, 16.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

²²⁰ Inez Redding, "A Daisy Wedding," *The Boston Cooking-School Magazine of Culinary Science and Domestic Economics*, June-July 1906, 39.

One hesitates to recommend a rehearsal of the incidents connected with what most people are pleased to think a very sacred occasion, but if the picturesque be aimed at, its successful attainment can be relied upon only by thoroughly acquainting all who participate with the part they are to take.²²¹

The notion that a middle-class wedding was something that needed to be *rehearsed* would have seemed strange earlier in the nineteenth century. Real weddings, like mock marriages, were becoming viewed as a species of performance – and something that required considerable work and energy to stage. Women involved with planning weddings often complained that the process was exhausting. Isabella Maud Rittenhouse noted in her journal in 1890 that a friend who had just married was “*dead* but happy” the week after her wedding. “Big weddings are such terrors,” Rittenhouse commented.²²² One advice book specifically cautioned against the bride against “spending so much time preparing for the momentous occasion” that she would start married life “with her nerves shattered and her vitality at its lowest ebb.”²²³ As the wedding ritual became more complex, it required more time, energy and consumption on the part of the bride and her family.

Books aimed at brides were a commercial innovation of the turn of the twentieth century and are one example of how the marketplace began to shape the ritual. Some wedding guidebooks were directly published by businesses interested in sales associated with weddings. For example, Butterick Publishing, a home economics publishing house associated with the sewing pattern company, produced a wedding guide in 1905 that included specific instructions in selecting designs and fabric for a bridal gown, as well as numerous other suggestions about wedding and anniversary planning.²²⁴ In addition to etiquette and guidebooks, brides were now beginning to be given purchased memory books

²²¹ *Weddings and Wedding Anniversaries*, 42.

²²² Mayne, "Diary of Isabella Maud Mayne, June 1890," 593.

²²³ *Weddings and Wedding Anniversaries*, 14.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

and albums in which to record details about their wedding days for posterity – and this had the effect of marking particular wedding practices as significant. Of some importance seems to have been remembering wedding gifts and their givers. After announcing her engagement in 1906, Marian Lawrence received “over ninety boxes of flowers” and made a list of each kind and who sent them in a book titled “Bride Elect,” which she proclaimed “the most useful gift.”²²⁵ After her marriage in 1895 in Atlanta, Cornelia Jackson Moore filled out the blanks in a commercially-produced book themed around keepsake swatches of the bride’s clothing. Moore pasted a swatch of the fabric from her white satin wedding gown on a page illustrated with a festooned church and annotated with the words, “This is the gown in which she stood / when she went to the priest and said she would.” Other pages included a place for a sprig from her bouquet, a list of all of her wedding gifts, clippings of the wedding announcements from the newspaper, and swatches of fabric from various dresses in her trousseau. Each page included a cheerful and sentimental rhyme to evoke the purpose of the clothing from which the preserved fabric was taken (“In this suit she takes her walks / stopping for friendly little talks”).²²⁶ The book offered Moore a place for recording memories and souvenirs from her wedding but also provided her a guide as to which memories and souvenirs were important elements of the experience.

Before 1920, there was not a clearly distinguishable “wedding industry,” as there would be later in the twentieth century. But there were indications that the white wedding was becoming more and more dependent upon the practice of consumption, and signs that entrepreneurs were beginning to recognize a plum market. The more complex the ritual, the

²²⁵ Marian Lawrence Peabody, “Diary of Marian Lawrence Peabody, January 1906,” in *To Be Young Was Very Heaven* (Boston, MA: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1967), 366.

²²⁶ Emma Moffett Tyng, *The Wedding Gowns: A Keepsake* (New York: Dempsey & Carroll Union Square, 1894), Wilmer and Cornelia Moore Family Papers, Atlanta History Center Archives, Atlanta, Georgia.

more likely brides and their families were to purchase the symbolic items or services needed, rather than produce or provide them at home. For example, a wedding invitation was now ideally sent out to be engraved, rather than handwritten, and had a precise form that usually required consultation with etiquette books or ritual experts. By the early twentieth century, it was common for fashionable brides to have their invitations engraved at noted stationery shops in larger cities. For the 1905 wedding of Janet Tompkins in Atlanta, for example, the wedding announcements were sent out to be printed at Tiffany's and Co. in New York.²²⁷

The wedding cake, too, became an element of the white wedding that was more frequently commercially produced. For a large white wedding, baking and frosting a wedding cake at home was less practical than purchasing a catered cake, even in less urban settings, and it came to be seen as less desirable for other reasons, too. One employee at a bakery insisted to a reporter in 1882 that "a bride must never make her own cake if she wants to have good luck."²²⁸ Although this did not preclude a relative or friend doing the baking and decorating, it was becoming more common for families of means to purchase this elaborate ritual object rather than creating it in a home kitchen. Bakeries placed advertisements in newspapers specifically mentioning a specialty in wedding cakes,²²⁹ which were usually then a dark, spiced cake with fruits and nuts, aged for weeks and decorated with white icing. In 1882, one bakery in Wisconsin offered options like "sugar grooms and brides holding hands under sugar horse-shoes twined with sugar flowers; sugar hands clasped in sugar rings, and no end of sugar emblems of fidelity and love."²³⁰ In addition to the wedding cake, bakeries offered a "bride's cake," which had a white or angel's food cake base and was also decorated

²²⁷ Colonel and Mrs. Robert James Lowry, "Wedding Announcement of Miss Janet Tompkins and Mr. Blanton Erwin Fortson, 1905," Atlanta History Center Archives, Atlanta, Georgia.

²²⁸ "Wedding-Cake Secrets: Something About Sugar Grooms and Candy Brides," *The Republican-Sentinel*, October 15 1882.

²²⁹ See, for example, "Best Wedding Cake at Swain's, 213 Sutter Street," *Daily Evening Bulletin*, March 08, 1886 1886.

²³⁰ "Wedding-Cake Secrets: Something About Sugar Grooms and Candy Brides," 6.

with white icing. (Eventually in the United States – but not in Great Britain – the bride’s cake, with its pleasing all-white symbolism, would eclipse the darker cake altogether as the “traditional” wedding cake, although darker “groom’s cakes” still persisted in some parts of the country.²³¹) Some families compromised; an 1887 family in Murray, Utah baked the layers of their daughter’s wedding cake themselves but sent them to Salt Lake City to be professionally decorated.²³² The creation of a lovely-looking wedding cake was viewed as important to the symbolism of the wedding, and this importance seems to have increased as cakes were produced in shops and bakeries.

Giving meaningful wedding gifts: pretty sentiments or vulgar display?

The elaboration of the practice of gift giving was an especially visible – and controversial – case of market involvement in white weddings in this period and another aspect of the wedding day that raised questions about authenticity, sincere feeling and performance. Giving and receiving wedding gifts seemed to lay out the practice of consumption in the most baldly obvious way. It could be framed as a genuine expression of feeling and friendship or as a vulgar gesture of etiquette and artifice. Critics complained that giving expensive clocks and china had turned gift-giving into empty posturing – but in their complaints, they often inadvertently attributed great sentimental importance to purchasing and receiving consumer goods, giving wedding consumption more, rather than less, symbolic significance.

²³¹ S.R. Charsley, *Wedding cakes and cultural history* (London: Routledge, 1992), 22-23. This may have had something to do with the puzzling twentieth-century development of an American distaste for fruitcake, which did not arise as strikingly in Great Britain. See Kate Colquhoun, "A Dessert with a Past," *New York Times*, December 24 2007.

²³² *Our Pioneer Heritage*, 20 vols., vol. 3 (Salt Lake City: Daughters of the Utah Pioneers, 1996).

As argued in the previous chapter, an appropriate wedding gift was once considered to be something useful given to a young couple starting off, but it now was viewed as an object that signified good taste and the couple's relationship to the giver. To be sure, periodicals still urged wedding guests to consider an item's practical value. An advice column in 1904 advised that gifts should be "useful" but then reminded the reader that "something unusual" was a good choice so that gifts would not be duplicated and suggested an "asparagus fork or a pea-server."²³³ Entrepreneurs began to notice and cultivate this market for wedding gifts. Starting in the 1870s and 1880s, advertisements began appearing in newspaper and magazines that directly appealed to those shopping for gifts for a bride and groom, asking consumers to consider buying jewelry, Japanese art objects, silver, teak wood furniture, hall clocks, music boxes, vases or watches, among many other kinds of merchandise.²³⁴

Although some women complained about receiving too many duplicates of the same gift, or gifts that were not in their taste, brides seem to have experienced the acquisition of wedding gifts, even to excess, as a pleasurable experience. Wedding gifts could serve as a material symbol of a personal connection with the friends and family who gave the gift. In 1917, Jessie Pottinger wrote to a wedding guest thanking her for the "unique little sugar tongs," which she and the groom considered to be "emblems of good luck, good wishes and happiness," which would "always stand as such for us."²³⁵ No doubt the genre of the thank-you note encouraged polite exaggeration, but the sentiment was common enough. One

²³³ Caroline Benedict Burrell, "Acceptable Wedding Presents," *Congregationalist and Christian World*, April 30 1904, 18.

²³⁴ "Antique and Teakwood Furniture," *Harper's Weekly* 1883, "If in Doubt ... Jewelry," *The Daily Picayune*, December 31 1899, "Tozo Takayanagi Japanese Art Objects," *The Art Amateur: A monthly journal devoted to art in the household*, January 1900, "Wedding Gifts," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, April 16 1886.

²³⁵ Jessie Thompson Pottinger, "Thank-you note to Julia Braulsford Butt Slaton, 1917," Atlanta History Center Archives, Atlanta, Georgia.

columnist in 1880 claimed that the reason a wedding gift was given was for the giver “to be remembered in the new life” of marriage, as well as to observe the occasion.²³⁶ However, brides seemed also to associate gifts with the beginning of a new role and viewed them as a way of making their new home lovely, both of which could be quite exciting.

Businesswoman Caroline Huling advised her niece in 1906 that it was the bride’s role to bring linen, silver and household items to a marriage. But this obligation would be a pleasure, Huling suggested, as the wedding gifts would provide much of what was needed, and “every true woman loves fine linen and pretty things for her home.”²³⁷ When Josephine Marks and her new husband moved into their new home in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1907, she wrote an effusive letter to her mother-in-law about the joy the couple took in arranging their wedding gifts. She described having a “glorious time” during meals, “using for the first time any amount of lovely belongings.” Of course, Marks commented, “[w]e seem to have more silver than we realized, or quite know what to do with” – so much so, in fact, that she describes an instance of waking in the middle of the night fearful that burglars would steal it. Now, she wrote, she slept through the night, but awoke early in order “to promenade the house, pleurably, and survey my enchanting belongings by the light of dawn!”²³⁸ Marks, and many other women, found this abundance of new household things to be part of the joy of the wedding rite.

However, wedding gifts, and especially the expense of wedding gifts, were a frequent target of complaints concerning the white wedding in this period, particularly (although not exclusively) from men. An 1890 newspaper article referred to wedding gifts as a “tax,”

²³⁶ "Time, Thought and Money," *Harper's Bazaar*, March 13 1880, 162.

²³⁷ Caroline A. Huling, "Letter from Caroline A. Huling," in *Letters of a Business Women to Her Niece* (New York, NY: R.F. Fenno & Company, 1906), 313.

²³⁸ Josephine Preston Marks, "Letter from Josephine Preston Marks to Mrs. S.E. Marks, September 28, 1907," in *Diary and Letters of Josephine Preston Peabody*, ed. Christina Hopkinson (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 1925), 210.

adding that “brides must have ‘em, though they do come high.” People were forced to buy wedding gifts beyond their means, the author claimed, or face social ridicule. “Fancy a man buying silver olive spoons and cheese knives [for gifts] with his pocket full of unpaid grocer bills,” the author complained. The whole practice, he said, was “an infernal bore.”²³⁹ In a column in the *Congregationalist and Christian World* in 1902, one author added up how much wedding gifts cost over the course of a year and wonders “how long American women are going to submit to a slavery to fashion which makes all their gifts perfunctory.”²⁴⁰

Women were typically more ambivalent about the practice of gift-giving than men. In 1893, a reporter interviewed a group of upper-class married women in New York about the possibility of forming an “anti-wedding present league,” an idea inspired by a similar group that had recently formed in London. Some of the women supported the idea on the grounds that wedding gift giving had become too extravagant and that eliminating it would help towards the “crushing out of ostentatious display.” But other women objected, claiming that the “numerous petty trifles that filled the young people with joyful gratitude” were sometimes “tenderly cherished through long years of sorrow and happiness together.” And if wedding gifts must go, one woman pointed out, why not Christmas, birthday and anniversary gifts, too? Perhaps “the whole system of benefaction should be abolished,” every “pretty sentiment” done away with, and if one was overcome by a “spasm of generosity,” one ought to go buy oneself a present. Another woman protested that “giving with me has always been a great pleasure,” and that anyone giving gifts simply because of social pressure had a “strain of vulgarity in them.”²⁴¹ Indeed, regardless of their opinion on the subject, none

²³⁹ “Wedding Gifts a Tax,” *Bismarck Daily Tribune*, June 1 1890, 4.

²⁴⁰ “A Slavery of Gifts,” *Congregationalist and Christian World*, July 19 1902, 93.

²⁴¹ “They Cannot Agree. Prominent Women Talk About Presents at Weddings.,” *Chicago Daily*, May 20 1893, 16.

of the women interviewed argued that there was any merit to giving solely because of social obligation. The purpose of a gift, it was implied, was to express one's feelings.

Indeed, in nearly every discussion of wedding gifts this consistent complaint was raised: the formalization of gift-giving etiquette had somehow made gifts less meaningful, less genuine expressions of feeling from a friend or family member. After all, the *Congregationalist and Christian World* author argued, if one felt pressed into buying gifts because it was socially expected, this robbed gift-giving of “the personal element, which is the heart and joy of the real gift from friend to friend.”²⁴² In a column aimed at young girls in 1915, a similar idea was expressed. A bride who has few friends, the article argued, “knew that each gift represented a genuine bond of affection; that none had come as payment of a social debt.” Each gift had been chosen with her in mind, and “had a personal quality, characteristic of her, the new owner.” On the other hand, a bride with many friends and social acquaintances might be flush with gifts of silver and clocks, but most of it, the author argued, was “for table use, as if the newly married and their friends were mere digestive machines” and much of it was either “unnecessary or inappropriate.”²⁴³ Such critics defined the problem as a lack of authenticity in expressing emotion through socially-mandated channels.

Of course, the argument that unnecessary spending was inauthentic social posturing was fairly common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, especially in liberal Protestant circles. It was perhaps most famously articulated in Thorstein Veblen's 1899 *Theory of the Leisure Class*, which coined the term “conspicuous consumption” to describe spending for the purpose of signaling wealth and social status rather than for utility. As

²⁴² "A Slavery of Gifts," 93.

²⁴³ "Girl's Page for January: "To Keep a Few Friends", " *The Youth's Companion*, January 7 1915, 14.

weddings became more elaborate and expensive, the price of gifts was not the only cost associated with the ritual that provoked commentary. Some argued that weddings themselves were becoming too large and motivated primarily by the vanity and pride of brides and their families. But although extravagant wedding spending was often spoken of as vulgar, it was also treated with the same ambivalence that surrounded gift-giving. Wedding advice books emphasized that there was nothing wrong with a small and quiet wedding, and that “a marriage celebrated in the presence only of parents and clergyman is honorable and dignified.” Putting on an “ostentatious display,” especially when one’s family could not afford it, was in poor taste.²⁴⁴ But the same books noted that “the wedding day is *the* day in a woman’s life,” and that it was no wonder that brides want “as handsome a wedding as purse and surroundings will admit.”²⁴⁵ The large wedding was sometimes condemned because it was symbolic of women who married for greed, an especially glaring case of using a wedding to put on a duplicitous show. For example, a poem in a magazine contrasted two brides, one marrying a rich man she did not love, in a grand and costly style (“Oh, cruel mockery of earth’s holiest tie:/ Oh, sordid wealth, won at so great a cost”) and one marrying a man she does love in a simple ceremony at home (“Upon her nuptial hour no rank or state / Shed their false luster.”²⁴⁶) The Canadian heroine of children’s fiction, Anne Shirley, assured her beloved Gilbert in 1915’s *Anne of the Island* that a modest wedding was not troubling to her because of the deep sincerity of her feelings: “I don’t want [diamond] sunbursts and marble halls. I just want *you*.”²⁴⁷

²⁴⁴ *Weddings and Wedding Anniversaries*, 14.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁴⁶ Janet A. McCulloch, “Two Brides,” *Shafts: a magazine of progressive thought* 1893, 28.

²⁴⁷ L.M. Montgomery, *Anne of the Island* (Toronto: Bantam Books, 1915), 244. Montgomery, although a renowned Canadian author whose books concerned Canadian girlhood, always enjoyed a substantial American readership for the *Anne of Green Gables* series. (In 1908, American readers bought nearly twenty-three times more copies of *Anne of Green Gables* than Canadian readers.) See Carole Gerson, “Canadian Women Writers and American Markets, 1880-1940” in *Context North America:*

Yet in other cases, outrage at the expense of the wedding was accompanied by a *fascination* with the wealth involved. “Two hundred thousand dollars is a great deal to spend on one wedding, but this is what Miss Josephine Drexel, daughter of the great banker, spent ...” reported one author in a woman’s column in a magazine – and then went on to provide considerable detail about the flowers, music, and trousseau.²⁴⁸ Some critics blamed the rising costs of weddings on the ignorance of young women about finances, assuming that anyone who themselves earned money would understand why large weddings were foolish. “If girls knew the value of money, and were taught to earn it,” one columnist claimed, there would be “fewer such vulgar displays as large church weddings.”²⁴⁹ A female author in 1921 echoed this sentiment, begging women to consider the “crushing” financial burden that an expensive wedding would put on her father. Yet she also acknowledged that the problem was that “from the time a baby girl begins to think, she commences to plan her wedding.” When you asked her to “cut out all the doo-dabs” and get married simply, “it is wrecking the dreams of her life.”²⁵⁰

The criticism of large weddings as social posturing implied, in part, that an elaborate wedding was not a sincere (and therefore simple) practice. But when some bemoaned that social pressure to purchase expensive wedding gifts caused gift giving to lose personal meaning – and when others claimed that simple weddings were more authentic than extravagant affairs – these critics were unwittingly contributing to a sentimentalism surrounding wedding consumption that entrepreneurs in the twentieth century came to depend upon. For example, some advice columnists argued that “if there is any significance

Canadian/U.S. literary relations, ed. Camille R. La Bossiere (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1994), 114.

²⁴⁸ “Concerning Women,” *Health*, April 1904, 128.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 419.

²⁵⁰ Dorothy Dix, “Have a Heart, Girls!,” *Boston Daily Globe*, March 21 1921, 12.

attached to a wedding gift beyond the simple acquisition,” then the giver’s unique taste ought to be reflected in the gift itself, so that it might remind the bride and groom of this person. Such voices did not realize that the kind of wedding gift-giving they were suggesting – which required special thought and the hope of lasting meaning attached to every gift – was not itself a “pretty and simple old practice,” but a new and rather complicated style of emotional shopping that depended upon a consumer ethos.²⁵¹ By insisting that a material thing should be an expression of a personal relationship and a way of creating and preserving memories, they were speaking out against ostentation and empty excess – but they were also helping to enchant the process of *buying* things, giving the items in a store’s display case a great weight of potential personal significance. Those who insisted gifts should express personal meaning were also inadvertently providing wedding entrepreneurs with very rationales they would use to sell products to brides, their mothers and their guests in the decades to come. The unintended consequence of the argument that the white wedding ought to come across as meaningful rather than “vulgar” was that consumption for weddings became freighted with the need to appear authentic, to express sincere feeling, and to be well-chosen rather than frivolous.

Something old and something new

Consumption for weddings also, more and more, needed to appear *traditional*. As changes in patterns of marriage, family and consumption surrounded the wedding, the unchanging nature of the ritual through time became a more prominent theme, even when it was necessary to invent timeless traditions altogether. Although fashions associated with the wedding might come and go, the white wedding itself was presented as an institution that

²⁵¹ "Time, Thought and Money," 162.

had always been. Memory and continuity were already of importance to mid-nineteenth century wedding rituals, but now language about the past seemed to infuse every part of the planning: in the notion that particular practices had deep roots, in the impulse to make explicit gestures to ancestors – and most importantly, in the felt need to carefully commemorate and document one’s wedding, the self-conscious creation of memories for the future.

The invention of traditions, as historians Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger have described it, can be a process of formalizing practices by attaching them to a historic past, real or otherwise. In Hobsbawm and Ranger’s work, the invention of tradition often happens for politically expedient purposes, but invented traditions can also provide social stability to a range of types of institutions, including religious institutions.²⁵² Drawing upon this idea, Vicki Howard has argued that wedding entrepreneurs, primarily after 1920, stoked the market for white weddings by inventing and selling wedding traditions – often traditions that were not so “traditional” at all, but relatively recent innovations that encouraged brides to buy more products.²⁵³ While this is certainly true after 1920 and will be discussed at length in chapter five, the demand for tradition, real or invented, had been part of the white wedding from its Victorian beginnings. This demand seems to have had more complicated origins than marketing strategies alone – an interest in the historical past seems to be one definitive characteristic of Western modernity – but commercial forces were undeniably instrumental in the process.

²⁵² Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 4. See also James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer, *The invention of sacred tradition* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.

²⁵³ Vicki Howard, *Brides Inc. American Weddings and the Business of Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006).

As was argued in the previous chapter, brides in the 1850s and 1860s were already interested in connections with the past. After 1880, there was an intensified interest in weddings throughout Western history – the wedding days of Vikings and Romans and medieval ladies and Puritan settlers – as well as in weddings of other cultures, which could sometimes be viewed as equivalent to the weddings of the Western past. Descriptions of unfamiliar wedding customs appeared frequently in books and periodicals, providing trivia about the “early days in England” when “rings were made of rushes,” or the “women of the Upper Byanzi, on the Kongo” who wore “their wedding rings around their necks.”²⁵⁴ Performances that presented a survey of stages of historical weddings, or weddings of less familiar cultures, enjoyed some popularity. (In one 1893 photograph, for example, an all-white amateur theater group in Wisconsin posed as the bridal party in a Japanese wedding.²⁵⁵) Sometimes the past was used as a way to reassure brides about weddings of the present, either simply legitimating contemporary wedding practices or bathing them in a complimentary light when compared to the barbaric customs of days gone by. One book on wedding customs told readers that “[f]rom distant Saxon days even into the eighteenth century the poorer bride came to the wedding arrayed in a plain white robe” – a claim that (erroneously) gives the white wedding dress a centuries-long history, entirely obscuring its more recent origins.²⁵⁶ Other times, the past was used to critique the present and was a way of expressing anxieties about the current state of marriage and family. For example, a book on wedding customs claimed that there were four stages of development in the history of the marriage “marriage by force, through contract, and through mutual love; and seems to be

²⁵⁴ "Curious Wedding Rings," *Bangor Daily Whig & Courier*, December 30 1899, 1.

²⁵⁵ Edward Alpheus Bass, *Local Actors Portray a Japanese Wedding* (Montello, Wisconsin: 1893), photograph, Wisconsin Historical Society, <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/whi/fullRecord.asp?id=47266>.

²⁵⁶ Carl Holliday, *Wedding Customs: Then and Now* (Boston: The Stratford Co., Publishers, 1919), 46.

... now in the fourth and last stage: marriage for convenience or social admiration.”²⁵⁷ In this example, the past plays several roles. The weddings of days gone by were once objectionable (marriage through force or contract), but then became authentic and pure rituals based in love. Finally, they declined into rituals of social posturing, the unfortunate state of the present.

One of the most well-known and persistent examples of an appeal to memory on the wedding day is the rhyme that prescribes particular items needed for a bride to wear: “Something old / something blue / something borrowed / something blue / And a silver sixpence in your shoe.” This rhyme directly links future and past, calling upon brides to purchase or obtain something without a past (something new) and invoke memory by including something with an explicit history (something old). In addition, the rhyme itself is a tradition, one that was often spoken of in the twentieth century as being a timeless superstition associated with bridal attire. The actual origins of this rhyme are unclear, although the reference to a sixpence suggests that it was originally a British expression. References to the superstition are rare in American or British periodicals prior to the 1890s, but one of the first published references was in a short story in *Godey’s Lady’s Book and Magazine* in 1881. In that story, the author makes reference to the “old rhyme that is a recipe for a properly dressed bride” and prints the entire expression as though it might be unfamiliar to the reader, although the reference to the sixpence is omitted. The author’s impression that the superstition was “old” may well be accurate; it may have been an orally transmitted rhyme, perhaps well known in a specific region. But many Americans, it would seem, first came to know this expression in the 1890s and 1900s. By the mid-twentieth

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 2-3.

century, “something old, something new” had ascended in cultural prominence so as to be ubiquitous in wedding advertising, headlines, and literature of all kinds.

The impulse to take steps in order to remember the weddings of the present was a particular boon to entrepreneurs – who had an interest in brides purchasing objects to create new memories, rather than reusing objects of the past.²⁵⁸ But it was also something wholeheartedly embraced by many brides and their mothers. The commercial memory book and wedding album, as discussed in the section above, took documenting the wedding day very seriously, turning the preservation of flowers and swatches of fabric into a fetishistic practice. Brides were encouraged to keep other items from their wedding day as well, such as the decorations from their headpiece or cake. (One sardonic teenager, finding this practice tiresome, wrote in her journal in 1901: “From wax flowers off of a wedding-cake, under glass ... Kind Devil, deliver me.”²⁵⁹) In the *Washington Post* in 1887, one columnist reported having been to a recent wedding reception where the bride and groom created what we would now call a “time capsule:” a tin box with a piece of the wedding cake, some photographs, a swatch of the bride’s dress, one of her gloves, some of the orange blossoms, and lists of the guests’ signatures and their gifts. They planned to seal the box up and open it again in twenty-five years – just as the bride’s mother had done at her own wedding. “What a chapter of history such a casket contains,” commented the columnist, recommending the practice to other brides.²⁶⁰

One “unique and original” bride in 1900 gave her friends and family framed photographs of herself as a gift, using fabric from her wedding dress and other significant dresses as the matting for each picture and inscribing the name and date of the wedding on

²⁵⁸ Howard, *Brides Inc. American Weddings and the Business of Tradition*, 164.

²⁵⁹ Mary Maclane, “Diary of Mary Maclane, March, 1901,” in *The Story of Mary Maclane* (Chicago: H.S. Stone, 1902), 322.

²⁶⁰ Evelyn Baker Harvier, “Some Novel Ideas,” *The Washington Post*, April 3 1887, 9.

the back.²⁶¹ In this gift, she drew upon the significance not only of the swatches of fabric from her dresses, but of one of the most important new practices of memory that emerged in this period: popular photography. Although wedding photographs (and before that, daguerrotypes) had existed in for decades, by the 1880s studio and amateur photography was fast becoming a part of everyday life for the middle class. Photographs were affordable enough to be given as gifts to friends or pasted on the tops of the boxes of cake given to guests as favors.²⁶² By the 1890s, advances in technology meant that it was cheaper and faster to have a professional photographer take a wedding picture than it was to hire someone to do a sketch, and increasingly it was assumed that brides and grooms would commemorate their wedding days with at least one photograph.²⁶³ Commercial photography studios offering portraits of all sorts sprung up in the 1880s and 1890s and were reasonably affordable even for couples of modest means.

The photograph represented a uniquely powerful conduit of memory, an image that could bring the viewer tantalizingly close to re-experiencing the past. As a memento of one's wedding day, it could provide specific visual information unlike any other practice of remembrance. Susan Sontag observed that photography emerged in the nineteenth century "to memorialize, to restate symbolically, the imperiled continuity and vanishing extendedness of family life," and that the "ghostly traces" of a photograph supplied the stand-in presence of relatives who are dispersed, who are no longer part of one's everyday life.²⁶⁴ To be able to photograph elements of one's wedding meant that the audience for this ritual – those who might appreciate or be affected by a dress, the flowers or the decorations – no longer

²⁶¹ "Framing the Bride's Picture," *Boston Daily Globe*, January 14 1900, 25.

²⁶² *Weddings and Wedding Anniversaries*, 64.

²⁶³ Mary Warner Marien, *Photography : A Cultural History* (London: Laurence King, 2002), 167-68.

²⁶⁴ Susan Sontag and Ebooks Corp., *On Photography*, 1st electronic ed. (New York: Rosetta, 2005), 9.

consisted simply of one's friends and family of the present, but also generations yet to come, and those who were not present.

Because of this, it is significant what images middle-class brides, grooms and their families selected to remember. There were, of course, some technological limitations to what could be captured. Before the 1920s, although amateur photography existed, most photography of brides and grooms took place in a professional studio, as cameras and related equipment were too unwieldy to bring to the wedding itself. There would likely be only a few images of a particular wedding or bridal couple. Most common was an after-the-fact portrait of the bride and groom, usually (but not always) dressed in their wedding day attire. In the earlier decades of wedding photography, particularly in rural settings, large group photographs were common: all of the attendees of a wedding standing in front of a church or house, with the bride and groom included simply as part of the crowd, distinguished only by the bride's veil (IMAGE 5). These photographs were as much a portrait of a family or community as of the married couple. But these group shots became much less common in the twentieth century, when portraits of a specially designated and costumed wedding party, in a formal grouping around the bride and groom, became the most common arrangement. In the late nineteenth century a carefully lit and arranged portrait of the bride alone in her white wedding dress (no groom visible) became a favorite shot. Photographs of a wedding in progress were very rare in this period, but in a 1906 photograph, bride Eva Wilson and groom George Mitchell stood in a lavishly decorated wedding space, flanked by their attendants and facing their seated guests, with the clergyman reading as though he were actively conducting the ceremony (IMAGE 6).²⁶⁵ Because it took so long to shoot a photograph (and perhaps also noting the expressions on the faces of the

²⁶⁵ *Wedding of Eva Wilson and George Mitchell* (Florida Historical Society: Florida Memory Project, 1906).

children in the photograph, who look directly at the photographer), this was probably a staged, after-the-fact shot and not a glimpse of a wedding as it happened – but the intent seems to have been to preserve the wedding as it looked when it was unfolding, to create an image that was as close to the reality of the moment as possible. The decorations and flowers associated with weddings were also considered a worthy subject for photography. Often amateur photographers would take pictures of the interior of the church or reception site, preserving how the flowers, evergreen, palm fronds, crepe paper, ribbons, table and cake looked for posterity (IMAGE 7). In 1902, the *Ladies Home Journal* offered its readers a sum of money to send in such photographs of decorated churches and homes, advising that “new and unique ideas” would stand the best chance of being selected, and that photos should be taken so that others could copy ideas for decorations.²⁶⁶

The impact of the advent of popular photography was, in part, that Westerners became more visually attuned to the world around them. As Sontag put it, photography taught Westerners a “new visual code,” which affected both “our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe.”²⁶⁷ It is difficult to assess how much the impact of photography (and eventually film) affected the staging of wedding rituals, although it seems clear that it became more and more important to consider the visual effect of all aspects of the white wedding. One newspaper announcement for a 1917 provides some examples of this obsession with visual coordination and perfection, both on the part of those who planned the wedding and those who reported upon and read about it in the society column. In considerable detail it described what it termed “the wedding picture,” which included lengthy and detailed accounts of how the bridal party descended the stairs in the bride’s family home, “which were made into an aisle of fresh foliage, passed through a

²⁶⁶ "Advertisement 5 - No Title," *The Ladies' Home Journal*, April 1902, 2.

²⁶⁷ Sontag and Ebooks Corp., *On Photography*, 3.

cool massing of palms and ferns in the hallway, where clusters of the opulent magnolia were outlined against the green,” or how the bride’s table “was a picture in pink, its centerpiece on a rare lace cover a plateau of pink sweetpeas,” with “[s]ilver baskets of sweetpeas alternated with pink-shaded candles,” and “little white baskets handpainted in valley lilies” holding bonbons.²⁶⁸ The careful description was intended to create a mental photograph of how the wedding looked, even for those who were not present. This attention to visual detail was something that would be seized upon by advertisers in decades to come – for the purposes of nourishing ever-new forms of wedding consumption.

The direction and stage management of a wedding – either choosing the items for one’s own wedding or for the weddings of others (the beautiful clothing, the cake, the albums to be filled with memories) – could be tiring but meaningful and pleasurable work for women, as has been suggested above. Critiques of wedding consumption were more likely to be articulated by men, who sometimes also groused about their marginalization in the wedding rite in general. One 1899 article complained about a tendency to assume that men “were tolerated only because bridegrooms are considered indispensable in marriage ceremonies.”²⁶⁹ But it is also important to stress that as entrepreneurs became more sophisticated about marketing, the wedding was also becoming viewed as the bride’s initiation rite into a role as household shopper – a role in which consumption was not simply a pleasure, but a responsibility. To shop for and buy a wide spectrum of products was part of the duty of overseeing a happy middle-class household and a subset of the expectations associated with ideal femininity. Consuming the right products was turning into a *moral* responsibility for women, a view that would be the default position by the mid-twentieth

²⁶⁸ "Society," *The Atlanta Constitution*, June 15 1917, 6.

²⁶⁹ "Wedding Pictures," *New York Times*, July 30 1899, 17.

century. Starting in the first decades of the twentieth century, advertising began to stress to young brides that how one consumed could have serious effects on the happiness of her marriage and family. The copy of one 1904 advertisement for skin cream, ostensibly speaking to a married man, asked if his wife was “as fair and fresh as the day you were married?” The question was accompanied by an illustration of a veiled and youthful bride, clutching a bouquet of fresh flowers. If she was not, the advertisement went on, it was “probably because she neglected to care for her skin,” which “left lines on her face and robbed her of the bloom of her youth.” If her husband would suggest she buy the skin cream, the advertisement recommended, this could help her regain her “youthful charm.”

²⁷⁰A 1907 advertisement for shredded wheat cereal waxed poetic about the June bride, “radiant in roses and wedding gown,” whose “cup of happiness is filled to the brim and running over.” But into this “dream of bliss,” the advertisement warned, comes “the demon of indigestion – and then domestic discord.” If a new wife cooked badly and everyone has indigestion, the copy observed, it would “sow dragon’s teeth in Elysian fields.” This trouble in the family could be avoided, suggested the advertisement, if the bride prudently purchases shredded wheat.²⁷¹ By the 1940s and 1950s, the list of products that could save a woman from causing trouble in her marriage and home life would be very long indeed.

But although choosy feminine consumption was increasingly being framed as a responsibility by advertisers, consumption, and especially “frivolous” feminine consumption, still tended to have a suspect moral reputation in Christian circles. In the next chapter, I review some of these Protestant objections to the burgeoning consumer culture, some of

²⁷⁰ Pompeian Manufacturing Company, “Your Wife?: Pompeian Massage Cream Advertisement 1908” in New York Public Library Digital Gallery, <http://digitalgallery.nypl.org/nypldigital/id?817844>.

²⁷¹ “For the Love of the Wheat,” *The Boston Cooking-School Magazine of Culinary Science and Domestic Economics*, June-July 1906 - May 1907 1906, xxv.

which were expressed in overtly gendered terms. But especially in light of these concerns about consumer culture, why did the increasingly extravagant and theatrical white wedding not raise more protest from Christian communities and leaders? How could the “church wedding” come to serve as a synonym for an expensive and lavish affair? In the chapter that follows, I will argue that American churches shared some interest in large weddings with the advertisers who promoted them.

**CHAPTER FOUR:
“Marriage is quite as serious a matter as death:” American Christians and the danger
of divorce, 1880-1920**

What proof have you that you hold me?
That in reality I'm one
With you, through all eternity?
What proof, when all is said and done?
-- Marie Tudor, 1917, “Marriage”²⁷²

Consumer culture and its many perceived attendant evils – duplicity, vanity, greed, selfishness, indifference to the poor – worried liberal Protestant leaders in the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century. Most agreed with Thorstein Veblen and equated consumption with satisfying desires that were nonessential, for purposes of social posturing or greed. For social reformers, consumption and consumer culture were usually considered morally problematic or at very least simply frivolous and trivial.²⁷³ Advocates of the Social Gospel, such as Walter Rauschenbusch, warned about an economic system that exploits labor while it “beseeches and persuades us to buy what we do not want.” Rauschenbusch argued that women were especially susceptible to unnecessary spending and described “show-windows and bargain-counters” as “institutions for the promotion of covetousness among women.”²⁷⁴ Yet there were few Christian critiques of the continued commercialization of wedding practices, and the critiques that did exist were rarely expressed in religious terms.

Why did changes in wedding practices – which in many cases happened literally within church walls – fail to elicit more commentary from the leaders of institutional religious bodies? Although the white wedding ritual itself involved the institutional liturgies

²⁷² Marie Tudor, *The Potter's Clay Poems* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1917), 25.

²⁷³ Colin Campbell, "Consuming Goods and the Good of Consuming," in *Consumer Society in American History: A Reader*, ed. Lawrence B. Glickman (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), 20.

²⁷⁴ Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1907), 265.

and theologies of particular denominations, the actual planning and executing of weddings was a task for women, not denominational leaders: a better discussion topic for ministers' wives than for their husbands. Indeed, it seems to have become a common courtesy in this period for minister's wives to receive the fees when their husbands officiated at wedding services, likely because of the wedding-related work that fell on their shoulders. But it was also because American churches were anxious about marriage itself. What alarmed Christian leaders was not that weddings were too elaborate, but that marriages were being undertaken too casually.

Certainly most Christians would have considered it crass to link the church wedding too directly with consumption intended for social posturing. As mentioned in the previous chapter, excessive gift-giving could be frowned upon by Protestants as something inauthentic and suspect. Some observers wrote wistfully about Quaker weddings celebrated in the "old school and style," with no music, clergy person or elaborate dress, and admired them as "pretty" and "picturesque" – particularly in comparison to the weddings of modern Quakers who had chosen to throw aside old customs to marry in ostentatious "splendor and dash."²⁷⁵ (This nostalgia for the simple practices of the past also showed the appeal of weddings from history.) Some also complained about Protestant ministers who sought to make too much money from officiating weddings – either by charging excessive amounts for wedding fees or by directly soliciting business. One author claimed in 1909 that fewer couples in New York were seeking out church weddings because of ministers who asked for high fees.²⁷⁶ While this claim was not accurate in the long run, it suggested the author's distaste for mixing religion and business in the wedding rite.

²⁷⁵ "Two Quaker Weddings," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 26 1887, 13.

²⁷⁶ George Jean Nathan, "A Merry War for Marriages," *Harper's Weekly*, May 22 1909, 16-17.

While liberal Protestants, like many in the press, were well-prepared to criticize consumption for reasons of fashion and social posturing, they did not always have arguments readied to criticize consumption in the service of family or romantic love, as these middle-class values had now been thoroughly integrated into Protestant world views. Christian marriage was a social good, and buying frivolous items for its celebration could often be seen to be justified on these grounds. In a similar sort of argument, historian R. Laurence Moore has argued that many liberal Protestants in this period embraced advertising methods for their own churches, giving outright approval to an industry that was already facing criticism for “creating phony desires and elevating lying to a science.”²⁷⁷ But church advertising, Moore noted, could be justified on the basis that anything pushing Christianity could not be bad for society. Money spent on marriages involved related justifications. An elaborate wedding that was staged for purposes of crudely displaying wealth and status was clearly to be condemned. But it was more difficult to object to an elaborate wedding that was staged because parents loved their daughter, because a good and loving woman needed gifts to equip a beautiful household in which to raise children, or because a family wanted to celebrate together. During a period of rising divorce rates, an elaborate wedding that seemed to promote a reverent attitude towards marriage seemed an awkward target of criticism.

In chapter three, we saw how the white wedding became more elaborate, performative and dependent on consumption in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In this chapter, we turn to the response of mainline Protestant churches to changes in marriage practices, most prominently denominational worries about the prevalence of divorce and the question of whether churches had the authority to prevent it. These anxieties, it will be argued, helped to cast the elaborate church wedding in a favorable

²⁷⁷R. Laurence Moore, *Selling God: American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 215.

light, helping to legitimate increased wedding day consumption. To help demonstrate the extent to which consumption was legitimated by the end of this period, the chapter will conclude by comparing the reactions of major newspapers and magazines to the 1886 wedding of President Grover Cleveland to the coverage of “war weddings” during the First World War. This comparison will suggest how moral interpretations of what was appropriate on the wedding day changed dramatically in thirty years.

The indissoluble bond: making Christian marriages last

Concurrent with the family and economic changes in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were changes in American religious institutions. Although the Protestant establishment enjoyed a position of social and cultural authority in most regions in the late nineteenth century,²⁷⁸ Protestant leaders expressed a growing and unsettling concern that this authority was not what it used to be. This impression was heightened by the mushrooming numbers of new immigrants, most of who were not Anglo-Protestant, who were continually shifting the religious demographics of the United States. The sense of displacement was also encouraged by the growth of cities, which seemed to be able to offer Americans an endless variety of opportunities for commercial leisure that was often viewed in competition with traditional religious commitment. As increasingly specialized expertise and knowledge became a prerequisite for professional careers in many fields (such as medicine, law or social work), many Protestant clergy found that these experts were handling services once more likely to be provided by ministers.²⁷⁹ By the 1920s, and particularly in the aftermath of the national church-led attempt to make alcohol illegal during Prohibition, Protestant churches

²⁷⁸ Sydney E. Ahlstrom and David D. Hall, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 842-43.

²⁷⁹ E. Brooks Holifield, *God's Ambassadors : A History of the Christian Clergy in America* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2007), 178.

began to be aware of their limitations in shaping American opinion.²⁸⁰ Yet despite these worries, many Protestant clergy and lay people continued to believe that Christian churches were the best and most powerful institutions to combat large-scale problems and preserve moral order. Protestant denominations of the period often formed extralegal agencies and moral reform organizations to fight social vices and to influence government officials, and certainly expected to have significant impact within their own congregations.²⁸¹ And in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries, the churches turned their influence to the question of American marriage.

While Protestant leaders had much to say on the topic of marriage in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, they had relatively little to say about the wedding itself. One exception was the question of whether brides should promise to “obey” their husbands in the formal wedding vows – and what this promise implied about gender relations in an ideal Christian marriage. The bride’s vow to “love, honor and obey” her husband had deep roots in the English-speaking world. Although prior to the Reformation it had sometimes been added to the *Sarum Rite*, the liturgy used by most English Catholics, it was truly institutionalized in the first *Book of Common Prayer* in 1549. Although some argued that the promise should be retained – either out of respect for tradition, because of the scriptural basis of the sentiment, or because “the Creator intended that [woman’s] happiness should be entirely at man’s disposal”²⁸² – by the early 1920s many agreed that requiring wifely obedience was neither desirable nor realistic. Especially because women were often assumed to be the more morally upright of the two sexes, requiring women in this period to

²⁸⁰ Ahlstrom and Hall, *A Religious History of the American People*, 914.

²⁸¹ P.C. Kemeny, “Banned in Boston: Commercial Culture and the Politics of Moral Reform in Boston during the 1920s” in *Faith in the Market: Religion and the Rise of Urban Commercial Culture*, ed. John M. Giggie and Diane Winston, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 135.

²⁸² “The Model Woman,” *The Milwaukee Sentinel*, November 11 1883, 4.

promise to obey their husbands over their own consciences seemed to be “obsolete, out of date ... and also untrue.”²⁸³ Baptist clergyman Halsey Knapp of Brooklyn in 1888 opposed the use of the word “obey” in the wedding rite and argued that St. Paul would never have intended “blind obedience” on the part of women. No woman was really obligated, said Knapp, to set aside her “religion or personal purity” at the behest of a man who was “an atheist, or of corrupt life.”²⁸⁴ Opposing the inclusion of the word “obey” did not necessarily hold “suffragist” or militant connotations. According to her best-selling twentieth-century account, Laura Ingalls, who was married in a Congregationalist church in North Dakota in 1885, assured her fiancé Almanzo Wilder that she did not favor women’s rights, but neither could she “make a promise that I will not keep, and, Almanzo, even if I tried, I do not think I could obey anybody against my better judgment.”²⁸⁵ By the early 1920s, the bride’s promise to obey was optional in virtually all mainline Protestant liturgies, except for the important service in the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*, which omitted it in 1928.²⁸⁶ Its elimination, while not universally applauded, was relatively uncontroversial. To many, the rise of companionate relationships between men and women made such a lopsided promise seem barbaric.

Other marriage-related issues of interest to mainline Protestants in this period included continued distress over Mormon polygamy in Utah territory, a practice that would formally end in 1890, and a decades-long conversation in several denominations about the

²⁸³ ““Obeyists” Scarce: Women in Favor of Change in Marriage Vow Apparently in Large Majority,” *New York Times*, April 23 1922, 98.

²⁸⁴ “Women Will Agree,” *The Idaho Avalanche*, December 8 1888, 1.

²⁸⁵ Laura Ingalls Wilder, *These Happy Golden Years* (New York, London, Harper & Brothers, 1943), 301. Although parts of this series for children are exaggerated and fictionalized, this account was reportedly based on a true incident. See John E. Miller, *Becoming Laura Ingalls Wilder* (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1998), 70, 252.

²⁸⁶ It was removed from the Methodist liturgy as early as 1864. See Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, “Marriage: Methodists,” in *The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. Paul F. Bradshaw (London: SCM Press, 2002), 306.

degree of kinship permissible for two individuals to marry.²⁸⁷ But for most denominations, the most important aspect of Christian marriage to be discussed was the question of whether, why and how it could be ended. Divorce was uncontroversial in the sense that nearly everyone viewed it as a dire and pressing social problem; at an interdenominational conference of Protestants in 1889, it was named one of the greatest evils facing contemporary society, along with immigration, materialism, intellectualism, Roman Catholicism and the antagonism between classes.²⁸⁸ American Christians felt that divorce was a moral failure on the part of many parties: lawmakers, denominational leaders, individual spouses, and the pastors that married them.

Especially unsettling for mainline Protestant church leaders was the seeming intrusion of divorce into their own congregations. In 1880, startling statistics were reported in newspapers concerning divorce in New England; in many states the rate of divorce nearly doubled between 1860 and 1878. Furthermore, the *Boston Daily Globe* added, these divorces were “almost exclusively sought by the descendents of the original New Englanders” and pointedly *not* Irish or German immigrants. The newspaper wondered if “the family association” was “losing all its attraction for the descendants of the sturdy Puritan?” And would native-born Protestants be “compelled to admit that our only hope is in the foreign

²⁸⁷ While the denominational debates over divorce seem clearly a response to a rise in national divorce rates, these debates over kinship and marriage are harder to interpret. There was not, for example, a notable rise in incest rates or marriages of first cousins in this period. Some of this debate seems to have stemmed from an internal Episcopal church question: how distinct the American church should be from the Church of England, which had its own formal table of permissible degrees of kinship. This question had been discussed at General Conventions since the early nineteenth century. But the issue came up for Presbyterians in the 1880s, too, and deliberation on the subject was considered notable enough to be reported in newspapers. William Crosswell Doane, *Kindred and Affinity: God's Law of Marriage* (New York: Young and Company, 1880). A Layman, *Considerations on the Marriage with the Sister of a Deceased Wife* (Washington, D.C.: Rufus H. Darby, Printer, 1880), "Presbyterian Marriage Regulations," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, April 12 1885.

²⁸⁸ Rev. John B. Devins, "The Christian Conference," *Christian Advocate*, December 12 1889, 806.

population?” – or, put differently, are Catholics doing better at family life than we are?²⁸⁹

Some social evils may have been attributable to the bad habits of recent immigrants and their children, but this was, seemingly, not one of them.

Many sought to determine the causes of this rise of divorce among American Protestants. First, denominational leaders pointed to what they believed were lax and inconsistent divorce laws, which made divorce too easy and differed drastically state to state. This was the impetus behind the national divorce law reform movement. However, especially around the turn of the twentieth century, most church leaders were careful to identify other “powerful influences” that led to the dissolution of marriages, too. A Congregationalist committee on marriage in Maine in 1883 blamed a population that was more inclined to travel, which “weakens the power of home life;” the misleading and overly romantic impression of marriage offered by literature; the proliferation of social clubs based on gender or age rather than on family bonds; and the lower birth rate, as it was raising children that provided “the strongest of all bonds.”²⁹⁰ In a periodical offering topics for ministers to speak about in the pulpit, one sermon blamed divorce on particular tendencies of modern life, including extravagance in spending, seeking entertainments outside of the home, the “general loosening of moral restraints” – and also, of course, the “rapacity of a class of lawyers.”²⁹¹ Many, like Episcopalian George F. Seymour, felt that the changing role of women had contributed to the weakening of marriage. When women pushed for more power, he argued, everyone became “thoroughly confused as to the true relations of the sexes,” and when “silly girls” refused to promise to obey in their wedding vows, it meant, in

²⁸⁹ "Divorces in New England," *Boston Daily Globe*, May 23 1880, 4.

²⁹⁰ George Sherwod Dickerman, "The Divorce Evil. Report of a Committee of the General Conference of Maine, June 21, 1883," (1883), 4-5.

²⁹¹ I.K. Funk, "Issues for Pulpit Treatment," *The Homiletic Review: A Magazine, Devoted to the Publication of Sermons and Other Matter of Homiletic Interest*, November 1883, 113.

principle, “a home without a head, a school without a master, a state without a ruler, and a universe without a God.”²⁹² In 1914, a clergyman identified one cause of the problem as modern women who were not truly prepared or willing to take on full domestic responsibilities. A young woman would, he claimed, leave school early “to escape its final tests” or work in a store or office, and “after months or years of the ceaseless grind, she was offered the hand of a young man who knew as little about life and was as inexperienced in home-making as herself.” Inevitably, this would lead to household tension and eventually divorce.²⁹³

Another important and frequently cited cause of divorce was “hasty” and “clandestine” marriages. Influenced by unrealistic romantic notions derived from books and magazines, young couples were prone to marry quickly, imagining that “their wedded life will be unique, different, unlike that of their friends, more romantic, more ideal.” Often such couples had never discussed the “graver subjects of life,” and did not have “the remotest idea of what attitude the other takes toward the great facts of life upon which the durability of their wedded life depends.”²⁹⁴ Without any further thought, without parental approval or counsel, such couples rushed to courthouses or to unscrupulous ministers and were married. To such youthful, impetuous couples a wedding was an exciting lark, as insubstantial as a mock marriage – and this had dire social consequences.

In the worry about clandestine marriages – and in nearly all of the proposed causes of divorce – rang the same underlying concern: too many men and women were treating the institution of marriage without sufficient reverence and priority. While the white wedding itself rarely entered into these conversations (except in references to the serious and binding

²⁹² George F. Seymour, *Marriage and Divorce* (1905), 11.

²⁹³ H. William Pilot, *Engagement and Marriage, or the Way to a Happy Home and the Causes of Divorce* (Philadelphia: The International Bible House, 1914), 5-6.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

promises made during the wedding vows), the tendency to emphasize the seriousness of marriage reinforced the tendency towards elaborate church weddings. If the hasty, courthouse weddings of unprepared brides and grooms were part of the problem, the big white wedding provided reassuring symbolism: marriage was sacred, transformative, and supported by family, religion and community.

Yet while Protestant churches unanimously praised Christian marriage as the cornerstone of moral life, they disagreed about what exactly it was that the marriage rite signified. This disagreement underlay the Episcopal Church's discussion of how to handle church members who were divorced, particularly when they wanted to be remarried in the church. When a divorce was caused by "a change of mind, or indifference or caprice, or frivolity, or the desire for variety, or by a new passion supplementing the old," it seemed clear on scriptural grounds that the parties involved should not be permitted to marry again with the church's blessing.²⁹⁵ But if a marriage ended due to adultery on the part of one of the spouses, it was not agreed whether the *wronged* party should be permitted to remarry in the church. This question hinged on the interpretation of several passages from the Book of Matthew, including:

whosoever shall put away his wife, *saving for the cause of fornication*, causeth her to commit adultery: and whosoever shall marry her that is divorced committeth adultery²⁹⁶

Because scripture seemed to consider an unfaithful spouse a legitimate cause for ending a marriage, Methodists and Presbyterians, among other groups, allowed for this so-called "Matthean exception" in their marriage regulations. For the Episcopal Church, however, this was a more fraught issue. In this period, the Episcopal Church was in the midst of a debate

²⁹⁵ Morgan Dix, *Divorce and Re-Marriage: A Sermon Preached in Trinity Church on the Fifth Sunday in Lent, March 16, 1902* (New York: Edwin Gorham, 1902), 9.

²⁹⁶ *The Holy Bible*, King James Version. (New York: American Bible Society, 1999; Bartleby.com, 2000), www.bartleby.com/108/. (accessed February 1, 2010), Matthew:19:9, italics added.

about the significance of its own rites – and indeed, the larger question of whether or not the Episcopal Church considered itself to be a part of Catholic or Protestant Christianity. Until 1904, the Episcopal Church had no allowance for the Matthean exception, holding to an official position that Christian divorce was, in fact, not truly possible. For William Doane, the bishop of Albany, to remarry any divorced person – even one who was innocent of wrongdoing – was acknowledging that it was possible to dissolve a union that was “indissoluble and indelible except by death.” Doane argued that marriage was very close to a sacrament in the church, “a union, mysterious in its character, of twain making one,” it was impossible for human beings to decide it had ended – for any reason, under any circumstance but death.²⁹⁷ However, there were those in the church who opted for a position towards remarriage of divorced persons in line with other Protestant denominations, and in 1904 the Matthean exception was written into the church’s canons on matrimony.

The position on marriage as indissoluble was in line with the position of the Roman Catholic Church, which held that marriage, as one of the seven sacraments, was “by its very nature above human law,” and bound the couple to an “inseparable union.”²⁹⁸ To be sure, the Catholic Church also had the option of annulment, or the declaration that the marriage was invalid from its start due to a problem of initial intent on the part of one or both of the contracting parties – say, an intent to commit adultery, or to purposefully limit the number of children. Some Protestants charged that annulment looked awfully like divorce in practice. Yet in an age of anxiety on the subject, there was some Protestant sympathy for – and even envy towards – the sacramental view of marriage. There was certainly a push to frame marriage in more significant religious terms. One Methodist minister emphasized that

²⁹⁷ William Crosswell Doane, *Marriage and Divorce from the Standpoint of the Church: A Paper Read before the Episcopalian Club of Massachusetts in Boston* (Boston: George H. Ellis, Printer, 1898), 6.

²⁹⁸ Jos. Selinger, "Moral and Canonical Aspect of Marriage," in *Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1913).

marriage, while not a sacrament, was a divine ordinance controlled solely by divine law. This was a point worth repeating, he advised, during the rite itself – so that it could not “be made the sport of reckless State legislation,” or viewed as simply a civil matter.²⁹⁹ If we are “civilized and Christian people,” one Protestant author remarked, “it ought to be the established rule with us, as it is with the Roman Catholic church, that the marriage bond is one for life.”³⁰⁰ Presbyterian minister Thomas De Witt Talmage bemoaned that “our boasted Protestantism” was “admitting anything and everything” on the subject of divorce, while the Catholic church permitted none.³⁰¹ While they might have disagreed with the theological or scriptural reasons behind sacramental marriage, many approved of the idea that marriage ought to be viewed as religiously serious and something more than merely a matter for the state.

Yet in a nation where Calvinist leaders had once emphasized that marriage was best considered a civil matter, some feared that the Protestant churches were no longer powerful enough to stop the rise of divorce. In 1880, Pope Leo XIII released an encyclical letter in response to a controversy over divorce laws in France emphasizing that marriage, as a sacrament, ought to be under the authority of church and not state. In the *New York Times*, an editorial writer expressed mild admiration for the Pope’s position, but argued that the Catholic Church was ultimately swimming against the stream. The “tendency of the times” was towards civil marriage, argued the author, and marriage depended upon the state, not the church, for its ultimate validity. Divorce, the author said, was “the logical outcome of

²⁹⁹ George K Crooks, "Carelessness in the Use of Our Liturgy," *Christian Advocate* 59, no. 43 (1884): 691.

³⁰⁰ "The Practice of Divorce," *Massachusetts Ploughman and New England Journal of Agriculture* 39, no. 36 (1880): 2.

³⁰¹ T. DeWitt Talmage, "Clandestine Marriages," in *Satan in Society and His Modern Methods of Winning Victims*, ed. Norman Morand Roumane (Beaver Springs, Pa: American Publishing Company, 1903), 69.

this view of marriage.”³⁰² An anonymous Episcopalian churchwoman wrote in a startlingly candid 1900 pamphlet that churches could do nothing at all to prevent parties from divorcing, as marriage was not really under their jurisdiction. After all, she remarked, from a legal perspective, a church wedding “full of beauty and solemnity” was equally as effective at creating a new marriage as “words mumbled by a justice of the peace in a dingy little office.” She further commented that the more “the power of the Church decreases, its desire to be all powerful increases. It seems unable to recognize its own feebleness.”³⁰³ In this, she succinctly summarized the fears of many Protestant bodies about their ability to combat the problem of divorce. At least one Catholic observer agreed whole-heartedly: Protestant ministers could do nothing about the dissolution of marriage because they had no real authority, reported to their congregations, and thus “lost all courage to reprove popular sins.” When their congregants wanted more liberal civil divorces, he argued, the Protestant churches “acquiesced promptly in these laws, because the pews demanded the concession.”³⁰⁴ The Catholic Church, he concluded, was the best-equipped Christian body to stem the tide of divorces.

It was in this context that the middle-class white wedding became more elaborate – and it was *because* of this context, in some large part, that church leaders did not object more strenuously to the continued commercialization of white weddings. The “church wedding” had now for several decades been popularly understood as involving “more trouble and expense than a home wedding,” and it still held this reputation.³⁰⁵ Yet the elaborate church wedding was now also viewed as an alternative to an entirely civil and secular marriage – the

³⁰² “The Pope on Marriage,” *New York Times*, March 14 1880, 6.

³⁰³ A Churchwoman, *Divorce and the Church* (1900), 3,4.

³⁰⁴ B.J. McQuaid, “The Decay of Protesantism,” *The North American Review* CXXXVI, no. CCCXV (1883): 14.

³⁰⁵ *Weddings and Wedding Anniversaries*, (New York: Butterick Publishing Company, Ltd., 1905), 15.

kind of hasty, informal ceremony in the “dingy” justice of the peace’s office that was assumed to result in a more casual attitude towards marriage.

A sacramental view of marriage – or at least the aesthetics of a formal, high-church wedding liturgy – had an elective affinity with the commercialization of white weddings. While Catholic and Episcopal churches certainly did not deliberately market their rites of matrimony to other Christians, these formal liturgies were widely viewed as the standard of wedding practices, largely because of their emphases on tradition, symbolism and aesthetics. As mentioned in chapter two, a large church wedding in any Protestant denomination would often “very much resembl[e] that of the Episcopal ritual,” as a Presbyterian wedding in Kentucky did in 1882.³⁰⁶ In 1888, a letter writer to a Episcopal Church periodical expressed concern that so many non-church members used the church’s service for weddings, presumably for “social reasons,” or because they found it “so impressive.” But the rite of marriage was not intended for use by Methodist, Congregationalists, Unitarians or “nothingarians,” the letter writer stressed, and to allow it to be so widely used was to reduce it to “a piece of irreverent formalism.”³⁰⁷ To many the Episcopal service did seem to represent simply a more formal option for the wedding rite. An 1889 nondenominational handbook written for Protestant ministers and advertised in Christian periodicals included three forms of wedding liturgy: a very brief service, a medium-length service that excluded the “giving away” of the bride, and the most formal and “traditional” option, which it titled the “Episcopal Service.”³⁰⁸

³⁰⁶ "Some Recent Weddings That Had Features of Exceptional Interest," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, November 4 1882, 16.

³⁰⁷ L., "Marriage of the World's People by the Church," *The Living Church*, April 21 1888, 46.

³⁰⁸ Minot J. Savage, *Ministers' Hand-Book for Christenings, Weddings and Funerals* (Boston: George H. Ellis, 1889), 19.

The rich visual symbolism of Catholicism, so admired by Harriet Beecher Stowe generations before, seemed more appropriate than ever to the wedding rite in the age of photography. The chancel of a Catholic church, one newspaper columnist remarked in 1890, “is the most effective setting possible for a wedding picture,” primarily due to the background of “the brilliant altar, its countless candles ablaze and flanked by huge bouquets of white chrysanthemums,” as well as “the gorgeous vestments” of the priest and the “rich cardinal gowns and white surplices” of the choir boys. Moreover, the columnist went on to add, Roman Catholic ritual itself added “an element of grace to the entrance of the bridal party, ushers, and bridesmaids,” as they paused a moment to genuflect as they entered.³⁰⁹ And the more formal the liturgy and ritual, the more commercial elaboration seemed to be required. The spectacular wedding of Josephine Drexel, in 1904, was described as *religiously* formal: involving an impressive twenty-five priests, bishops and archbishops, but also elaborate in its spending: it cost two hundred thousand dollars, and called upon “fifty trained choristers, a string orchestra, as well as an organ, and the greatest singers in New York[.]”³¹⁰ The modest marriage at home, with few attendants or guests, did not have the theatrical or commercial potential of the church rite – and both brides and church leaders were increasingly attracted to the symbolism of the latter.

The changing moral meaning of the “modest” wedding

In the midst of American Christian concerns about marriage – and within the context of the elaboration of wedding practices discussed in chapter three – there was a discernable shift in attitudes towards the morality of consumption for the wedding day in this period. This shift was due in large part to the same market changes of the late nineteenth

³⁰⁹ “Her Point of View,” *New York Times*, November 30 1890, 10.

³¹⁰ “Concerning Women,” *Health*, April 1904, 128.

century that allowed the white wedding to become larger and more lavish, but it was also made possible by church emphasis on the importance of marriage, which functioned to give legitimacy to the large wedding. One way to understand how moral attitudes changed is to compare the discourse around President Grover Cleveland's wedding in 1886 to the discourse around "war weddings" during American involvement in the First World War from 1917 to 1919. The circumstances of these case studies are quite different: a singular wedding versus a widespread wedding trend; a time of peace and relative prosperity versus a time of war; a president's wedding versus the weddings of large numbers of soldiers. Yet the view of what constituted a good and proper wedding was implicit in the press discussion of both. The Cleveland wedding and the war wedding offer a helpful window into the effects of anxiety over marriage, large weddings and consumption.

In 1886, Grover Cleveland became the first (and to this date only) president to marry in the White House, and the wedding was of intense interest in the press. The bride, a special focus of media attention, was Frances Folsom, a reportedly beautiful young woman who was twenty-seven years Cleveland's junior and his former ward. Cleveland had taken responsibility for her upbringing after the death of her father, one of his law partners, and developed romantic feelings for her when she was in college. The wedding was private, but described in intricate detail in the papers, from the music played by the Marine band, to the thirty-pound wedding cake iced with the initials "CF," ringed by "a broad circle of most beautiful La France roses," to the dresses of all women in attendance. Folsom was described in the language of transformation as a personage who had gone from a "shy, retiring school-girl to the self-possessed, stately woman, who ... in her shining bridal robes had stood the central figure in their midst."³¹¹ The press mythologized the wedding in language rich in the

³¹¹ "Now They Are Married," *Chicago Daily*, June 3 1886, 1.

imagery of civil religion. For instance, *Boston Daily Globe* printed sheet music for a song written in honor of the couple: “Our Wedding Hymn, God Bless Him and His Bride.” (Sample lyric: “Ring, wedding bells, for him your highest, bravest notes / Chime softly, sweetly clear for her as if from silver throats.”)³¹² Sentimental and patriotic images of the president and his new wife were used to sell merchandise and souvenirs. For example, the Merrick Thread Company printed trade cards with images of Cleveland and Folsom surrounded by cupids who held a heart made of thread around the couple’s heads, and a punning inscription that read: “The thread that binds the union.”³¹³

Despite the press attention to the wedding, most observers marveled that Cleveland and Folsom were admirably private about their nuptials. The wedding had only twenty-five guests, no attendants, and there was no public display of wedding gifts. The wedding was an example of “great simplicity in high places,” one newspaper proclaimed, performed by a “plain Presbyterian clergyman” who had known Cleveland’s family for years. The president’s marriage rite was a praiseworthy celebration of “natural human feeling and modesty,” which was particularly notable, as “everything must have tempted him to the opposite.” It was a triumph for those who regarded a wedding as “private sacrament rather than an occasion for a public circus.”³¹⁴ Many expressed disapproval of the excessive press coverage and public interest. One paper commented that Cleveland must realize that “all his privacy about a private matter does not suit the American people who, since the advent of modern journalism, have no private matters.”³¹⁵ Another columnist poked fun at the amount of detail being reported about the wedding and recommended to the public that “we had all better

³¹² James W. Clarke, "Our Wedding Hymn. "God Bless Him and His Bride."" *Boston Daily Globe*, June 3 1886, 4.

³¹³ "President and Mrs. Cleveland Trade Card," (Merrick Thread Company, 1886).

³¹⁴ "The President's Simple Wedding," *New York Times*, June 14 1886, 4.

³¹⁵ NYM Crinkle, "Cleveland's Wedding," *The Atlanta Constitution*, June 7 1886, 1.

mind our own affairs.”³¹⁶ Although an intensely interested media and public threatened to turn this presidential wedding into a public pageant (or “circus,”) there were many who continued to maintain that in order to be sincere expressions of feeling, white weddings should be private and simple.

When the United States became involved in the First World War roughly thirty years later, there again was widespread public discussion of weddings in newspapers and periodicals, and again the small and modest wedding was held up as an ideal. But now the small wedding held another, more dangerous connotation too; it could be a sign of a marriage not given proper consideration under wartime circumstances. As American men were conscripted for the war in Europe, numerous couples married under rushed conditions, anticipating the groom’s imminent departure. The public’s attitude towards these war weddings shifted in emphasis over the course of the war: sometimes applauding romantic weddings, and sometimes worrying about the consequences of hasty marriages.

During the first few weeks after the U.S. declaration of war in April of 1917, the press reported on a rash of weddings that were presented as attempts to avoid military service: nervous grooms banking on the (incorrect) assumption that newly married men would be treated differently by the War Department than unmarried men. In the press these “slacker weddings” were roundly condemned, as “[a]ny man who thus seeks to hide behind a woman’s skirts is a moral and physical coward.”³¹⁷ A few clergymen in Chicago publicly refused to marry “slackers,” and young girls were warned about linking their fortunes to those so craven so as to avoid their duty.³¹⁸ After the War Department announced in late April that men married after the formal declaration of war would be treated the same as

³¹⁶ Howard, "Chat About the Cleveland Wedding," *Boston Daily Globe*, June 3 1886, 4.

³¹⁷ "Denounce Slackers in Marriage Rush," *New York Times* April 11 1917, 13.

³¹⁸ "Ministers Refuse to Marry Slackers," *Boston Globe*, April 13 1917, 10.

those who were unmarried, this initial burst of nuptials apparently slowed, although there were to be many more swift marriages throughout the war.³¹⁹

But the war wedding was not always associated with cowardice, but instead could hold rather romantic and dramatic connotations. Most stressed that elaborate weddings with many attendants and expensive bouquets were not appropriate for wartime, and the abrupt schedules of soldiers meant that sometimes even when large church weddings were planned, they often had to be rescheduled suddenly. (This was the case with the 1917 wedding of Peter Bryce and Angelica Brown in New York, who cancelled a big society wedding and married at home with only their intended attendants as their guests after the declaration of war changed plans.³²⁰) But periodicals still reported on wedding trends, including headpieces, dresses and themes especially appropriate for the times. In one example, an advice columnist reported seeing a military nurse married in a white dress and veil that were “a trifle nurselike,” and exiting the church door under “a sort of trellis made of bandages.”³²¹ War weddings were spoken of as emotionally thrilling, involving a moving courage on the part of bride and groom, and generating an intensity that many associated with commercial entertainment. One last-minute war wedding was described as rivaling the “exciting happenings reeled off in the movies in connection with obstacles that confront some matrimonial alliances” only with “two young people of Greater Boston as the principals.”³²² One columnist wrote that because of the “simplicity, the absence of display and of extravagance” involved in war weddings, as well as the romance provided by the circumstances, some weddings she had attended were dramatically moving, “almost

³¹⁹ "War Weddings Become Fewer," *Los Angeles Times*, April 21 1917, 112.

³²⁰ "Her Wedding Is Hastened by War," *New York Times*, April 8 1917, 20.

³²¹ Anne Morton Lane, "War Time Weddings and How They Are Celebrated Abroad," *Atlanta Constitution*, July 1 1917, 18.

³²² "Movie Thrills Are Tame Beside This War Wedding," *Boston Daily Globe*, September 30 1917, 56.

heartrending occasions.”³²³ While weddings in wartime were by necessity austere, they were still spoken of in the language of sacred performance: as occasions that generated intense emotional reactions in their audience.

But another reaction to the “war wedding” was one provided in part by some Protestant clergy who warned that rushed weddings might have undesirable consequences. Some worried that too many young people, women especially, were getting swept up in the romance of wartime and not making wise choices. Newspaper columnist Dorothy Dix called war weddings “rash and reckless” and argued for a more realistic approach, advising young men and women to consider their financial situation above all, calculating in the possible additional costs of a “war baby” or the groom’s debilitating injury in battle.³²⁴ Dix also worried about the temptations available to young war brides left alone and called for older women to adopt them as protégées, helping them to avoid any “blunders into ruin.”³²⁵ In Atlanta in early 1918, the Baptist minister John W. Ham gave a sermon urging young women to “stop, look and listen” before marrying a soldier. Too often, he pointed out, unsavory men were using the war as an excuse to commit bigamy, and women should not rush into marriage with anyone.³²⁶ Yet others, like Episcopal clergyman Percy Stickney Grant, defended the war wedding on sentimental grounds. Grant viewed it as a higher, more pure form of marriage, relying upon a “deeper determination of hearts,” which caused couples to cast aside the lesser reasons of family, finance or the “indecision of sentiment.” Grant thought the war wedding admirably drew out a courageous spirit in men and women alike.³²⁷

³²³ Lane, "War Time Weddings and How They Are Celebrated Abroad," 18.

³²⁴ Dorothy Dix, "Dorothy Dix Talks: The War Brides," *Boston Daily Globe*, February 11 1918, 8; Dorothy Dix, "To Marry or Not to Marry," *Boston Daily Globe*, July 12 1918, 10.

³²⁵ Dix, "Dorothy Dix Talks: The War Brides," 8.

³²⁶ "Rev. J.W. Ham Preaches against War Weddings," *The Atlanta Constitution*, February 21 1918, 12.

³²⁷ Percy Stickney Grant, "The War Marriage and Its Purpose," *Forum*, June 1918, 688.

One common theme in both the discourse around the Cleveland wedding and the weddings of soldiers during the First World War is the role that civil religion and national identity played in the wedding ritual. In the next chapter, we will see that this again would become a common theme during the Second World War, and the nationalistic popular associations with white church weddings would linger until at least 1970, when symbolically honoring the family's particular ethnic traditions began to eclipse them in importance. As one advice columnist put it during the First World War, wartime could mean that "all weddings mean more to nations than they did."³²⁸ While brides and grooms were expected to sacrifice lavish spending for smaller, makeshift affairs, war weddings were often represented as events symbolic to not only the immediate families involved but to the community and country at large.

The "modesty" of a war wedding was thus of a different species than the "modesty" of Cleveland's wedding. In 1886, the relative lack of nuptial lavishness was taken to be a sign of the bride and groom's good character and distaste for un-American pomp. In 1917-1919, the lack of nuptial lavishness was taken to be at worst a bride's sad, heroic compromise and at best a glamorous symbol of sacrifice and struggle. Sometimes war weddings were spoken of as necessary for American morale. Occasionally more lavish weddings were justified on these grounds, too. One columnist commented that many girls were choosing "the big wedding with the *Lobengrin* march and the bevy of bridesmaids" in order to provide themselves with the comfort in "the beauty of the elaborate ceremonial," which provided "a more vivid picture to keep in the long days when he is over there."³²⁹ When the influenza epidemic spread by soldiers hit Chicago in 1918, the newspaper worried that the resulting ban on public events meant "a couple of perfectly stunning weddings [were] going to be just

³²⁸ Lane, "War Time Weddings and How They Are Celebrated Abroad," 18.

³²⁹ Corinne Lowe, "For the June Bride," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 2 1918, B1.

as good as ruined,” and, drawing upon gods of love and marriage from antiquity, expressed hope that “Dan Cupid and Hymen and a few other influential citizens would better get together and call off this ‘Flu’ ban.”³³⁰

Even during the hastiest of war weddings, women were sometimes unwilling to sacrifice particular white wedding traditions. In one 1921 Canadian novel for girls set during the First World War, the youthful heroine decides to throw together a war wedding for a friend in only one afternoon. With little time, she concentrates on hunting down several apparently indispensable ritual ingredients: the marriage license, a wedding ring, the wedding cake, which was “all a bride’s cake should be,” a white dress (the bride refused to be married in black, the color of her only formal dress), and a veil. This impromptu wedding even included attendants and a lunch afterwards. “Some good fairy evidently waits on the wishes of war brides,” the book observed of the fast and fortuitous wedding planning.³³¹ The message of the story was clear: no bride, and certainly not a woman marrying a soldier, should be without any of the trappings of the white wedding.

The Cleveland wedding was praised for its privacy and lack of ostentation. Although many interested Americans wanted to serve as its audience, the bride and groom seemingly eschewed many of the trappings of a performance, keeping their affairs to themselves, which was admired. The weddings of American soldiers, on the other hand, while usually not expensive or elaborate, were small dramas representative of the war effort: passionate performances of duty and romance. What war weddings lacked in lavishness they made up for in emotional intensity. Rather than the spectacular coordination of flowers and cake, the awe-inspiring backdrop of the church, or the loveliness of the dresses, the wartime

³³⁰ "Epidemic Threatens to Interfere with Weddings," *Chicago Sunday press and the women's press* 1918, 6.

³³¹ L.M. Montgomery, *Rilla of Ingleside* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company, 1921), 216,14. See footnote 247.

circumstances provided the wedding with its larger-than-life associations, and gave it a sacred quality. These rushed, emotionally-intense war weddings were always understood in the press as an aberration, a temporary adaptation to dire circumstances. Yet the intense and romantic emotions associated with the war wedding (as well as with the narrative structures of the burgeoning mass media) would be another source of sacred meaning that entrepreneurs could draw upon in the twentieth century. If the nineteenth century gave the white wedding its sense of formality and pageantry, the twentieth century came to link it more and more with glamour and emotional intensity.

Chapters two, three and four have charted the creation of the modern white wedding form and its continued formalization and elaboration due to changes in family life, rising marketplace involvement and an elective affinity with the interest of Protestants in protecting marriage. Sacred meaning in the wedding resulted from the coinciding of interests of marketplace and church. In the next chapter, this meaning would be more fully developed as the white wedding became firmly established as part of mass culture. From 1920 to 1970, the white wedding would take its place as a widely-understood and expensive American ritual that turned ordinary women into extraordinary princesses, at least for one day.

CHAPTER FIVE:

Wonderful dream come true: the mass market fairy-tale wedding, 1920-1970

Her stepmother and sisters didn't
recognize her without her cinder face
and the prince took her hand on the spot
and danced with no other the whole day.

-- Anne Sexton, "Cinderella," *Transformations*, 1971³³²

The expensive wedding day in 1950s Hollywood film

Not every Hollywood film in the mid-twentieth century celebrated the white wedding. Jane, the practical-minded young bride-to-be in the 1956 American film *The Catered Affair* said from the beginning that she did not want a big wedding. But the older women around her, chiefly her mother, pushed for her to plan a "catered affair" with all the "trimmings." Adapted from a popular teleplay written by Paddy Chayefsky, this film depicted the conflict over the wedding among members of the Hurley family, a household of devout, working-class Irish Catholics in the Bronx. When Jane (Debbie Reynolds), matter-of-factly announced her intention to get married to her longtime beau in two weeks' time, she emphasized that the wedding will be brief ("ten minutes, tops!"), conducted by a priest in the morning, and without reception, as the young couple planned to leave afterwards on a highly anticipated honeymoon road trip to California. Her father, Tom Hurley (Ernest Borgnine) – a cab driver who was close to having enough savings to purchase his own cab – admired her pragmatic attitude. Her mother, Agnes (Bette Davis), felt that Jane does not understand the "big thing" that a wedding represents in a woman's life:

I want you to have this one fine thing, with all the trimmings! Something to remember when, well, the bad days come, and you're all wore out. And you're growing old, like me.

³³² Anne Sexton et al., *Transformations* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971), 53.

Agnes was attracted to the upper-middle-class prestige of throwing her daughter a white wedding but also believed that the posh “trimmings” – the wedding dress, a ballroom, a caterer – strengthened the emotional significance of the day to the bride. Some of Jane's friends and family members found a bride who wanted a subdued wedding to be suspicious. Some wondered if Jane was “in trouble.” A neighbor commented, “Ten minutes in the morning? That don't even sound religious to me.”³³³

Agnes insisted that her daughter would have an expensive wedding (whether she wanted it or not) – with a dress and a ballroom that would cost far more than the family could afford, forcing Tom to give up his plan to buy his own cab. By the film's conclusion, however, Jane put her foot down and insisted on her original plan, troubled by the distress of her father, the inability of her bridesmaid to afford a dress, and the conflict caused in the family overall. Agnes, disappointed but contrite, arranged for the new cab for her husband and seemed newly resolved to put her energies into her own marriage. Rather than celebrating the expense and savoring the pageantry of the white wedding, *The Catered Affair* critiqued these elements as a source of conflict and suffering – and pointed to financial responsibility and humility as a foundation for familial harmony.

Critics of the time were skeptical of *The Catered Affair*. In fact, the noted gossip columnist Hedda Hopper listed it as one of the worst films of all time, for reasons she did not elucidate.³³⁴ Some argued that the film lacked the gritty Bronx realism it seemed to be aiming for and that Bette Davis, a glamorous leading lady of the previous decade, was not believable in the “unattractive role” of the working-class mother, Agnes.³³⁵ One point on which most did agree was that it was the character of Agnes, and not her husband, daughter,

³³³ Richard Brooks, "The Catered Affair," (U.S.A.: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1956).

³³⁴ Hedda Hopper, "'Birth of Nation' Best Film, 'Next Voice You Hear' Worst," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 3 1957, C6.

³³⁵ Bosley Crowther, "Nice Young Ladies," *New York Times*, June 24 1956.

or friends, who was centrally at fault in the film. One critic commented that in striving for the large catered affair without the money to pay for it, Agnes attended to everyone's wishes in the family "except the breadwinner," faulting Agnes chiefly for this neglect of her husband.³³⁶ Another critic argued that the film was flawed because Agnes was plain "selfish and vain," and lacked "honest humility and warmth." ("No matter how you look at it, that's what's the matter with her.")³³⁷ Critics expressed dislike for a woman who willfully insisted on spending her husband's hard-earned savings on ballrooms and fancy gowns, even if it were order to provide her reluctant daughter with "one fine thing, with all the trimmings." The film's script does supply Agnes with potentially sympathetic motives for wanting the large wedding for Jane (to compensate for her own grim and unromantic life and to insure Jane's will be different), but critics did not probe what the lavish wedding might represent to Agnes and read her as a two-dimensional villainess until her final conversion.

Into the twentieth century, many continued to argue that the white wedding had become too extravagant and viewed wedding consumption as phony posturing that damaged sincere romantic feeling and family relations. The culprits behind the extravagance were usually women, and the critics were more often men. But this perspective, and the perspective of *The Catered Affair*, was not the central theme of another earlier, more critically and commercially successful 1950s film about weddings.

The 1950 comedy *Father of the Bride* also depicted a family's struggle to come to terms with hosting a big catered affair but answered the question of whether it was legitimate to spend the money very differently. To be sure, much of the comedy in the *Father of the Bride* was based on the horror that the bride's father, Stanley Banks (Spencer Tracy), experienced

³³⁶ Richard L. Coe, "This Caterer Slipped Up," *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, June 15 1956, 62.

³³⁷ Crowther, "Nice Young Ladies," X1.

in learning how much his daughter's wedding would cost. Again, it was the women in the film that argued for the desirability of the expensive ritual although in this film, the bride expressed some excitement about the extravagance as well. Unlike the Hurleys in *The Catered Affair*, the Banks family was secure in their upper-middle class affluence, with a hired maid, fine furniture and a lovely house, and the white wedding was confirmation of their status, not a financial reach.³³⁸ Unlike the increasingly desperate and emotional Agnes Hurley, this mother of the bride, Ellie Banks, (Joan Bennett) was depicted as the family's calm and reasonable voice, a foil for her husband's frustration. Ellie ultimately argued that the money spent on lavish details was worth the price due to the importance to their daughter's happiness. She responded to Stanley's anxieties soothingly, calmly and non-threateningly, with a sentimental appeal to a wedding's importance for women specifically; it was, after all, "what every girl dreams of."³³⁹

Father of the Bride, which was adapted from a best-selling novel of the same name by Edward Streeter, was a critical and box office success. Critics read the central character, the father Stanley Banks, as a sympathetic and ordinary "hard working suburbanite"³⁴⁰ and described the film as being a comedy about the "lonely anguish of an American father as he sees himself well-nigh wrecked financially and mentally by the barbarous social custom of 'the small, simple wedding.'"³⁴¹ On the other hand, no one treated the film as a serious critique of dominant wedding practices. Critics of the time, mostly male, chuckled at and claimed empathy with Stanley Banks, but spoke of the large wedding as an inevitable (albeit

³³⁸ Katherine Jellison, *It's Our Day: America's Love Affair with the White Wedding, 1945-2005* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2008).

³³⁹ Vincente Minnelli, "Father of the Bride," (U.S.A.: Warner Home Video, 1950).

³⁴⁰ Mae Tinee, "'Father of the Bride' a Hit on the Screen," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 19 1950, B10.

³⁴¹ B.R.C., "Spencer Tracy Starring in 'Father of the Bride'," *Christian Science Monitor*, June 30 1950, 5.

difficult) custom with timeless, even “medieval” origins.³⁴² Although Stanley was “constantly outvoted or outmaneuvered by the women of the family,” the women were not viewed as greedy and selfish but as rather likeable characters; Joan Bennett made a “tactfully managing mama” and Elizabeth Taylor was “utterly charming as the bride.”³⁴³ (In fact, the publicity about the glamorous wedding of star Elizabeth Taylor to Nicky Hilton a few days before its release helped spur the film to box office success, suggesting some audience members were as much interested in seeing Taylor as a bride as they were in Tracy as the father.) The comedy was gentle and sentimental, and one critic described it as an essay on everyday life, commenting that “a lot of moviegoers may recognize themselves.”³⁴⁴ One critic called the film “as cheerfully American as our inimitable bridal customs.”³⁴⁵ The lesson taken from *Father of the Bride* was that white weddings were expensive hassles, especially for the bill-paying father, but they were also wholesome, time-honored American traditions.

Father of the Bride was popular enough to launch a sequel a year later (*Father's Little Dividend*, 1951, about the birth of Stanley Banks' grandchild) and a remake four decades later (starring Steve Martin and Diane Keaton, 1991). Yet even considering this legacy, the wedding thrown by the Banks family was not the most influential film wedding of the 1950s. That honor belongs to a wedding that occurs in the last scene of an animated film: a film not about wedding planning, but about a poor girl who ascends through magic to the level of royalty. Many decades after the release of Walt Disney's *Cinderella* (1950), women would aspire to a wedding – and especially a dress – that might be compared to those of the animated heroine of this film. Church bells pealing, shimmering white ball gown, enchanted

³⁴² Ibid.

³⁴³ Tinee, "Father of the Bride' a Hit on the Screen," B10. B.R.C., "Spencer Tracy Starring in 'Father of the Bride'," 5.

³⁴⁴ Richard L. Coe, "A Bride's Father and His Nightmares," *The Washington Post*, July 4 1950, B3.

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

carriage ride, sweet white bride with a blonde upsweep in a tiara: these elements became part of the ideal wedding in the American imagination.

The link between Cinderella and weddings had been referenced in periodicals before the release of the 1950 film; the term “Cinderella wedding” was often used to describe the nuptials of a bride of modest means who married a wealthy groom, as in the intensely-publicized 1948 “Cinderella marriage” of Barbara “Bobo” Sears, a actress and daughter of Lithuanian immigrants, to Winthrop Rockefeller, heir to Standard Oil, in 1948. But especially after the film’s release, Cinderella and the white wedding became associated with magical female transformation more generally: from girl to woman, poor to rich, ducking to swan, virgin to mother. The story of Cinderella provided the perfect myth for the twentieth century American white wedding ritual: a woman who achieves princesshood, rather than being born into it. It was a myth of feminine upward mobility, facilitated through consumption, enacted by women especially on the wedding day.

By the 1950s, the magical, transformative white wedding had come to be presented as “every girl’s dream” although it could not be, as *Catered Affair* pointed out, every girl’s reality. This chapter tells the story of the last stage in the twentieth-century ascension of the sentimental white wedding – the widespread democratization of the white wedding ideal that came about through the development of a mass market wedding industry. The previous three chapters attempted to provide an account of the origins of central themes involved in wedding practices since about 1840, as well as the role that churches and the burgeoning marketplace played in constructing these meanings. This chapter presents the case that as the wedding industry helped to make the white wedding a common expectation from 1920 onward, the image of the transformed princess, which drew upon both the connotation of Cinderella and associations with images of feminine divinity, took center stage in the ritual

and developed a symbiotic relationship with religious meanings of marriage. In what follows, the white wedding became an increasingly widespread ideal for American women, even for American women considered to be “outside” the norms of advertisers.

Tradition and the rise of the wedding industry

In the 1920s, the practices associated with the white wedding were increasingly sold to a mass market, with the result that this form of wedding became an expectation for a growing and increasingly diverse number of women. The American “wedding industry” was, of course, never one discrete entity but was (and is) composed of many kinds of businesses with different histories and relationships to the wedding itself: jewelers, department stores, hotels, restaurants, magazines, florists, photographers, travel agents. Many of these businesses had emerged from changes in production in the nineteenth century, but they turned to wedding-related marketing in response to the rise of more formal and systematic marketing strategies in the twentieth century.³⁴⁶ Advertisers, described by marketing historian Roland Marchand as “apostles of modernity,” began to view selling products not simply as listing the characteristics of a product, but as providing consumers with appealing tableaux of lifestyles, which sometimes took marketing into a realm more associated with religious meaning than with business. Offering more than simply practical reasons to buy, advertisers began to present the public with depictions of reassuring images of the world, providing guidance and orienting them with options in modern life.³⁴⁷ By the 1950s, businesses that profited from the white wedding had recognized the market and

³⁴⁶ Vicki Howard, *Brides Inc. American Weddings and the Business of Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 7, 30.

³⁴⁷ Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

sought to maximize it, consistently presenting the wedding as the bride's shining day, an occasion of magic, romance, transformation and tradition.

Trade magazines such as the *Dry Goods Examiner*, a periodical for department stores, and the *Jeweler's Circular-Keystone* first began discussing explicit strategies for marketing to brides and grooms in the 1910s and 1920s.³⁴⁸ By 1939, the *New York Times* was commenting upon the importance of the large "June wedding business" to the national economy, noting that the tax revenues generated by these sales meant "we simply couldn't afford not to give our brides a good send-off."³⁴⁹ By 1955, the *Wall Street Journal* observed that weddings were a 4.5 billion dollar annual business and that spending on the average wedding was rising, even as the peak number of marriage post-war was falling. Wedding spending was also, the article noted, appealingly dependable. A department store such as Wannamaker's in Philadelphia had a double motivation to create an in-house bridal salon. Wannamaker's could reasonably count on future wedding sales for decades to come, but also on the continuing business of each individual bride, "a gal just entering one of the major spending periods of her life."³⁵⁰ A wedding, in other words, meant both spending now on weddings and spending later on household items, furniture, and children.

The "long decade" of the 1950s was the high point of the sentimental white wedding. Not coincidentally, as historian of marriage Stephanie Coontz has argued, it was also the high point of a particular form of marriage that has since been viewed as "traditional." Never before or since were so many moving through life stages in so similar a pattern, choosing their own mates, getting married at unusually young ages, and entering quickly and enthusiastically into home ownership. This relatively novel marrying pattern was

³⁴⁸ Howard, *Brides Inc. American Weddings and the Business of Tradition*, 29-30.

³⁴⁹ "Topics of the Times," *New York Times*, June 5 1939, 14.

³⁵⁰ T.A. Wise, "Bridal Business: A Ring on the Finger Jingles Cash Registers for Host of Merchants," *Wall Street Journal*, August 11 1955, 2.

due primarily to the unique economic situation created after the Second World War and especially to the effects of the G.I. Bill, which gave returning veterans full tuition and a living stipend to attend colleges and universities. In effect, millions of working-class Americans became middle class due to this enormous federal subsidy, and the effects of this program would be broad indeed. At the same time, consumption was viewed more positively than ever, as a joyful, celebratory practice of American economic bounty, an affirmation that bad times were over. As middle-class women were no longer expected to work post-war, consumption was also viewed as a key way that women could and should express creativity and individuality.³⁵¹ All of this created the perfect storm, as it were, for a high point in celebrating white weddings.

To be sure, the twentieth-century mass market white wedding shared many characteristics in common with white weddings of previous generations. The ideal continued to involve engraved invitations, a bride costumed in a white gown, a church decorated with flowers, a processional and recessional with music and costumed attendants, gifts, a layered cake and as elaborate a reception as possible. The white wedding continued to be associated with family relationships, romantic love, and tradition. Yet there were some new practices associated with the ritual introduced in the mid-twentieth century that tended to involve a yet larger role for consumption and an emphasis on changing family patterns. Although these practices were virtually unknown in the nineteenth century, wedding entrepreneurs used the appeal of tradition to market them to brides and their families, sometimes inventing histories where none had previously existed.³⁵²

³⁵¹ Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History : From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005), 226, 27, 29, 37.

³⁵² Howard, *Brides Inc. American Weddings and the Business of Tradition*, 1-8.

One invented tradition of the twentieth century was the double-ring ceremony. Wedding liturgies such as the one in the *Book of Common Prayer* had a rubric, or action in the liturgy's "script," for the man to place a ring on the woman's finger. Women, and not men, traditionally wore wedding rings. But starting in the 1920s, jewelers began to successfully market a double-ring ceremony in which both man and woman exchange rings. This innovation would have the effect, of course, of increasing ring sales, as well as popularizing a ring practice that had a symmetrical symbolism more in line with twentieth-century sensibilities about marriage. (During wartime, it was apparently also appreciated as a way of giving soldiers a symbolic reminder of their spouses.) In 1948, the *Washington Post* claimed one in three bridegrooms got a wedding band,³⁵³ and by the 1960s, double-ring ceremonies were the norm. A letter to the advice columnist Abigail Van Buren in 1962 complained that wedding rings for men were silly, quoting an 1888 wedding prayer book that claimed rings were most appropriately viewed as symbols of the "bondage" of the bride. Van Buren responded with a single sentence: "Thank you for reminding us how much progress civilization has made since 1888."³⁵⁴ An older woman in 1960 told a newspaper reporter that while "in our day [the exchange of rings for bride and groom] would have looked like a jealous wife," she personally thought it made for an "awfully nice wedding ceremony."³⁵⁵ By the 1960s, the propriety of the double-ring ceremony was unquestioned. The wedding liturgies of major denominations reflected this change, as will be discussed further in chapter six.

Another innovation of the twentieth century was the bridal registry. For years brides had complained about receiving too many of the same gift or gifts that were not in their

³⁵³ "Something Different," *The Washington Post*, May 13 1948, C3.

³⁵⁴ Abigail Van Buren, "Dear Abby: Is Wedding Ring for Slaves?," *Los Angeles Times*, October 17 1962, A6.

³⁵⁵ Barbara Schulz, "The Jeweler Rings Twice," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 15 1960, E7.

taste. In 1904, an author in the *Congregationalist and Christian World* remarked that it was a pity that convention prohibited brides from sending out a list of presents they would like to receive. It would be more convenient for guests, the author observed, and would allow the bride to “think with calmness rather than apprehension of her future home.”³⁵⁶ In the 1920s, department stores began experimenting with “gift suggestion departments,” which allowed brides to officially register their preferences for china, silver, glassware and linen patterns and then provided gift shoppers lists of these preferences.³⁵⁷ As historian of weddings Vicki Howard has shown, department stores worried at first that bridal registries would come across as too vulgar: that the bride would be viewed as soliciting too directly for gifts, that she would know how much guests spent, and that the whole process was made too impersonal and bureaucratic.³⁵⁸ To avoid these associations, department stores tended to frame the registry as a kind and sensitive way of helping those purchasing gifts to save time and avoid embarrassment – or, even more intriguingly, as an indirect fairy-tale process, encouraging brides to literally toss their registry paperwork into a constructed magical “wishing well” in the bridal department, as was the case in Bullock’s in Los Angeles in the 1940s.³⁵⁹ By the 1950s, gift registries that allowed brides to list particular desired items were increasingly common, as well as an important sales mechanism for department stores. Although frequently advertised as helpful modern aids for a bride’s wedding guests, advertisements for bridal registries were also often surrounded by images of elegantly-set tables with “traditional” china and silver. In one 1958 advertisement for a Washington D.C. department store, the announcement of a gift registry was positioned next to an illustration

³⁵⁶ Caroline Benedict Burrell, "Acceptable Wedding Presents," *Congregationalist and Christian World*, April 30 1904, 608.

³⁵⁷ Howard, *Brides Inc. American Weddings and the Business of Tradition*, 116.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 117.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

of a table with fine china, sterling silver and crystal – a table decor described as “the essence of tradition translated to modern day.”³⁶⁰

All of these innovations and others were cloaked in tradition, which continued to give the white wedding form legitimacy and significance. But if placing the wedding day in a long sentimental history was appealing to the “old,” the “new” was the rise of an ever-growing set of advertising and media images associated with the bride, which emphasized bridal beauty to an extent unknown in previous generations. Furthermore, the beauty of the bride was special and linked to transformation more generally, which advertisers alluded to in references to feminine divinity.

Haloed, tiaras, and glass slippers: mass market weddings and the sacred feminine

As indicated in earlier chapters, Western imagery of the bride was already closely knit with images of ideal femininity and feminine piety, dating from at least the mid-nineteenth century, and harkening back to early Christianity and before. Twentieth century advertisers fully drew upon these associations and others, linking their images and descriptions of the bride on her wedding day with a diverse palette of Western icons of femininity: princess and saint, angel and movie star, fertility goddess and Virgin Mary.

Advertisers had many methods of linking products with sacred connotations, both in visual depiction and in written copy. Historian Roland Marchand identifies the illustration of “beams of light” as one of the visual clichés established in the 1920s and 1930s by advertisers: lights that spotlighted products, that emanated from products, that refracted against other beams in dramatic splashes, that glowed warmly from candles. While art directors perhaps did not consciously use lights to invoke religious symbolism, light,

³⁶⁰ “Julius Garfinkel & Company Advertisement,” *The Washington Post and Times Herald*, August 17 1958, F11.

Marchand argues, had “long represented divine force or influence,” and sometimes the use of light in advertisements “clearly implied (but never argued) that they represented the holy light of God’s favor.”³⁶¹ While Marchand uses the example of advertisements depicting light radiating from household appliances, the association of light and the divine was even more explicit in wedding-related ads.

Magazine and newspaper advertisements repeatedly bathed the bride in light: the glow of candles, of a satin dress, of her diamond engagement ring, of the sun through stained glass, of stars and moon. An illustration for a 1948 advertisement for the bridal department at Bullock’s department store in Los Angeles showed a very common image: a glamorous bride with dramatic candlelight cast across her figure, highlighting her both her beauty and her dress’s elegance.³⁶² Other advertisements described the bride’s dress as made of “gleaming ivory satin rayon,”³⁶³ “candlelight satin,”³⁶⁴ or “luminous fabric,”³⁶⁵ sometimes with a subtle “color glow,”³⁶⁶ or “a rich ivory tone that will glow softly in the dim inner recesses of the church glorified by shafts of light from the stained-glass windows.”³⁶⁷ Light shined on the bride’s belongings, too: her “gleaming new luggage,”³⁶⁸ her Oneida silverware, that “gleaming symbol of gracious living,”³⁶⁹ or even the wedding cake. A 1947 advertisement for Jane Parker cakes presented a cake model named Moonbeam, which was a pure white cake “sparkling with the golden light of its own candles.”³⁷⁰

³⁶¹ Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream*, 276, 79.

³⁶² "Bullock's Advertisement," *Los Angeles Times*, April 4 1948. D9.

³⁶³ Ibid.

³⁶⁴ "Carson's Advertisement," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 8 1952, B1.

³⁶⁵ "Blum's Advertisement," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 9 1934, 23.

³⁶⁶ Wanda Henderson Holzhauser, "California Designer Starts Trend for Fall Weddings," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 9 1953, 10.

³⁶⁷ "Jelleff's Advertisement," *The Washington Post*, September 20 1936, S5.

³⁶⁸ "Bridal Fashions Section Advertisement," *Chicago*, April 22 1950, 12.

³⁶⁹ "Oneida Community Silverware Advertisement," (1946).

³⁷⁰ "Jane Parker Cake Advertising Book " (Archives Center, National Museum of American History, 1947).

Some of the most notable and consistent appeals to light imagery in wedding advertising came from the NW Ayers advertising agency. In the 1930s and 1940s, NW Ayers created advertising for DeBeers diamond engagement rings, one of the most successful marketing campaigns of the twentieth century (“a diamond is forever”). NW Ayers, observing that the diamond especially lent itself to descriptions of light and reflection, used luminescent language and imagery in their advertisements for decades, often expressly comparing the light of the diamond with the otherworldliness or immortality of love and marriage. The copy in a 1940 advertisement for DeBeers quotes Byron: “A spark of that immortal fire / With angels shared” and describes a man who wishes he could give the stars and moons to his fiancée, only to settle on a reflective diamond engagement ring, “the one rare spark of immortal fire left on the earth.”³⁷¹ In a DeBeers ad for 1948-1949, a woman’s solemn face was surrounded by four diamonds radiating beams of light in the shape of crosses, with one glowing sun-like cross above all others. The copy read “enchantment without end – the magic lights of your diamonds cast their charms upon your ever-changing moods and fashions.”³⁷² In the 1950s, a series of ads that eventually included the famous “A diamond is forever” slogan were themed around celestial bodies, emphasizing that a diamond was a star made on earth and featuring images of young women standing against various kinds of diamonds suspended on trees, in the sky, or above their heads. In an ad for 1957-1957, an image of a young woman in Grecian costume was juxtaposed with a glowing diamond in the sky. The accompanying copy read:

Brilliant Venus, goddess of love and beauty, is the evening star once more.
She hangs her lamp of promise in the heavens, favoring lovers with her

³⁷¹ "DeBeers Diamond Engagement Ring Advertisement," (N W Ayer Advertising Agency Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, 1940).

³⁷² "DeBeers Diamond Engagement Ring Advertisement," (N W Ayer Advertising Agency Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, 1948).

lovely light. Long ago, and just for you, a star fair as Venus was born of earth, its mission, too, to tell of love.³⁷³

These advertisers presumably did not mean for consumers to believe that the diamond engagement ring was a magic object nor that it literally glowed with celestial light. But they did want to suggest that it was *enchanted* for women in the sense that it established a mood of romance, transcendence and permanence. The NW Ayers campaign was extraordinarily successful at transforming the diamond from a stone once associated primarily with financial investments to a stone that held these intensely emotional and spiritual connotations.

Advertisers also extended the light metaphor to the *time* in which the wedding took place. To refer to the wedding itself as the “shining hour” was quite common in advertisements of the mid-twentieth century, and to emphasize the set-apart nature of the wedding moment for the bride was a favorite rhetorical trope. A woman will have just this “one shining hour of breathtaking beauty,” advised one 1934 advertisement and thus likely require the “creative ability and flawless detailing” of a department store bridal salon.³⁷⁴ This is your moment to shine, other advertisements claimed, and it was “never lovelier, never a moment more sacred.”³⁷⁵ Emphasizing the singularity of the moment in time both further strengthened the case that the wedding day justified extraordinary expenditure and drew attention to the momentous transformation possible during a wedding. After your wedding day, these advertisements seemed to claim, you will never be the same.

Advertisements drew upon Christian symbolism in depicting bride and wedding day in the same way they drew upon beams of light, aiming for vague associations rather than explicit links. Visual depictions of weddings were almost always in churches, not in hotels or

³⁷³ "DeBeers Diamond Engagement Ring Advertisement," (N W Ayer Advertising Agency Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, 1957).

³⁷⁴ "Blum's Advertisement," 23.

³⁷⁵ "Advertisement for the Brides' Issue of the Mirror Newspaper," (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Times, 1950), 27.

gardens, and even when very little of the background scenery was visible, details like stained glass, candles, or steeples were included in illustrations or photographs. A 1939 Neiman Marcus advertisement for the store's bridal salon features a drawing of a bride dressed in a sleek and stylish dress, clutching a bouquet and a prayer book adorned with a visible cross.³⁷⁶ Bridal fashion shows, sponsored by department stores, made use of a church as backdrop. During a 1950 show at Bullock's department store in Los Angeles, the auditorium was reportedly "transformed" into a "flower-banked, cathedral setting."³⁷⁷ In a 1948 show hosted by the store Strawbridge & Clothier, a wedding tableau served as the climax, featuring gowns from their bridal shop and posing choirboys from a local Episcopal church.³⁷⁸

The bride herself was specifically linked to Christian symbolism, too. Newspaper feature articles on bridal fashions began referring to wedding veils as "cathedral length," "chapel length" or "Madonna length" in the 1940s, drawing upon not only language describing sacred locations for weddings but also directly referencing the traditional attire of the Virgin Mary, one of several feminine Christian figures associated with brides. Advertising images positioned the bride's limbs and face in ways that mirror the poses assumed by the Virgin Mary in Western art: her face illuminated by candles or light from above, looking modestly away, face draped in veil. The bride on her wedding day was also compared to other celestial entities in advertising; this was her "moment in life to look like an Angel,"³⁷⁹ and she was sometimes described as "haloed" in a veil and wreath.

The bride's nonspecific association with Christian symbolism was also layered with other, older European suggestions of feminine divinity, which were intermixed with images

³⁷⁶Neiman Marcus Advertisement [web] (1939 [cited April 4 2007]); available from http://home.att.net/~design-house/vintage_brides/vintage_brides_we_love_2.htm.

³⁷⁷Fay Hammond, "Short Wedding Dresses Featured at Bridal Show," *Los Angeles Times*, April 11 1950, B1.

³⁷⁸Howard, *Brides Inc. American Weddings and the Business of Tradition*, 110.

³⁷⁹"Jelleff's Advertisement," *The Washington Post*, May 8 1940, 17.

of female royalty and aristocracy. The image of the springtime bride, with flowers, wreath and veil, always had some relationship to centuries-old images of fertility goddesses or personifications of fertility in folk festivals such as May Day. The tradition of a Queen of the May celebration is a very old one, dating back to at least Elizabethan times but probably linked to much earlier celebrations of fertility in the month of May. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the May Queen custom underwent a renewal in popularity in schools, churches and community organizations. The Queen of the May in the Anglo-American custom was a young woman or girl, importantly a virgin, who was crowned with a wreath of flowers and costumed in a white dress and often a veil. Perhaps in part because of these affinities in costume, May Queens and brides were popularly associated with one another. Newspaper wedding announcements made note when the bride had once been crowned a May Queen, or when the bride was married in her May Queen dress.³⁸⁰ During the Second World War, one college campus temporarily changed its traditional crowning of the May Queen celebration to a crowning of the Victory Bride, who took part in a fashion show emphasizing patriotism and pride in the soldiers.³⁸¹ In Roman Catholic parishes, it was a statue of the Virgin Mary that was crowned for May Day, and by the twentieth century, a young woman was often selected to be Sodality Prefect for the ritual and costumed in a white gown with a veil. The Sodality Prefect laid flowers at the feet of a statue of the Virgin Mary, just as many Roman Catholic brides did on their wedding days. When high school senior Mary McClaine served as Sodality Prefect at St. Mary's Academy in

³⁸⁰ "Bride-Elect Chooses May Queen Robes," *The Atlanta Constitution*, March 5 1933, 6B, "Maryland University 'Queen' Gets Degree and Husband Today," *The Washington Post*, June 1 1940, 13.

³⁸¹ Alice Hicks Burr, "Marymount Queen Dons Bridal Garb," *Los Angeles Times*, May 1 1942, A5.

Austin, Texas in 1954, she wore a formal white gown and veil with tulle skirt that was indistinguishable from that of a bride.³⁸²

The May Queen was often spoken of as chosen for her beauty and shared this reputation in common with brides, too. In advertisements, the stunning beauty of the bride on her wedding day was a reliable descriptive and prescriptive theme. In some respect, wedding advertisers were simply capitalizing on a market already created for beauty, health and hygiene products for women. Warning female consumers that bad breath or body odor would prevent them from finding true love, some advertisers used the image of the lovely bride to show those who had “won” the chance to have a wedding day at all.³⁸³ Sometimes beauty advice for the bride could have a stern tone (“the bride is the cynosure of all eyes and should make herself as beautiful as possible”³⁸⁴), but the wedding day was also presented as a delightful, once-in-a-lifetime chance to be transformed into someone supernaturally lovely, an experience that many women seemed eager for. During the Depression in the 1930s, some criticized women who pushed for this experience even when it was financially impossible and warned the bride against “hugging the vision of herself parading down the church before enthralled spectators,” clinging to “the haloed version of herself in wedding finery.”³⁸⁵ Sometimes, especially later in the twentieth century, the bride’s beauty was compared to the charismatic glamour of a Hollywood movie star. In one young adult’s book from 1963, the protagonist, a young woman named Beany who is not depicted as especially vain, spends much time imagining her wedding day as her chance to be the “star of the

³⁸² The Seniors of St. Mary’s Academy in Austin, under the direction of The Sisters of the Holy Cross, *Blue Star Yearbook, St. Mary’s Academy* (Austin, Texas: Austin History Center Archives, 1954).

³⁸³ Daniel Delis Hill, *Advertising to the American Woman 1900-1999* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002), 71,73.

³⁸⁴ Carolyn Abbott, “Brides Now Avoid Pale Look, Proper Rouging Helps to Avert Pasty Pallor of Excitement.,” *The Washington Post*, May 29 1938, S6.

³⁸⁵ Doris Blake, “Lavish Wedding Often Is Source of Extravagance,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 10 1935, 19.

show,” picturing flash bulbs going off around her and guests murmuring “What a beautiful wedding dress! Beany is a beautiful bride.”³⁸⁶ Indeed, the beauty of the bride seemed to be important to the experience of the wedding for all involved. The power of the bride seemed to derive from her beauty, which captivated onlookers, and the degree of her beauty was somehow connected to both the force of the romantic love between her and the groom and everyone’s ability to remember the wedding in years to come.

The ascendance of a cult of commercial feminine beauty sustained and reinforced the perception that a wedding was moment for some observable physical transformation of the bride. The wedding (and the May Queen celebration) were not the only rituals in this period to rely upon the magical effect of feminine beauty. During the 1920s, at the same time that advertisers began to systematically cultivate markets for beauty and wedding products, business owners in Atlantic City, New Jersey launched the Miss America Pageant, a beauty contest for teenage girls and young women that grew out of photographic beauty contests popularized by P.T. Barnum in the 1850s.³⁸⁷ Unlike the custom of choosing a May Queen for a May Day celebration, the beauty contest was a formalized, public competition on the basis of physical appearance – something that would have been viewed disapprovingly as a violation of feminine respectability decades before but would come to be viewed as all-American fun. There are intriguing similarities in the versions of ideal femininity enacted in beauty pageants and weddings. The first pageants of the 1920s championed girls with a virginal, “angelic” look: innocent, domestic, with long hair (rather than the stylish bob) and a wholesome quality, although this ideal would be challenged

³⁸⁶ Leonora Mattingly Weber, *Something Borrowed, Something Blue* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1963), 29,34.

³⁸⁷ Kimberly A. Hamlin, "Bathing Suits and Backlash: The First Miss America Pageants, 1921-1927," in *There She Is, Miss America: the Politics of Sex, Beauty and Race in America's Most Famous Pageant*, ed. Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 33.

throughout the 1920s and 1930s by a more worldly, sexualized, Hollywood version of femininity.³⁸⁸ The structure of the Miss America pageant ritual was (and is) the same structure as a fairy tale, complete with happy ending. In 1933, after several days of competitions in evening gowns and bathing suits, and many public appearances and parades, Marian Bergeron (Miss Connecticut) found out on stage that she had been selected by judges to be the most beautiful and thus was Miss America 1933. She “walked into the lights, with two little pages holding her robes . . . [and was crowned by a judge,] placing the diadem at a rakish tilt.”³⁸⁹ Later, Bergeron would remember her win as a “beautiful rewarding experience.”³⁹⁰ At the climax of the Miss America ritual, the winner was transformed into a princess, holding a bouquet of flowers, waving, wearing a crown, admired by all others for her beauty. Like the wedding day, the pageant was a rite of passage in which one ordinary girl became an extraordinary woman through a carefully cultivated theater of personal appearance. Her beauty marked her, set her apart, and lifted her above female competitors.³⁹¹ And the parallels between beauty pageants and the marriage market were sometimes made quite explicit: in 1940, headlines announced that a former contestant for Miss America, Miss Washington of 1938, had earned a new title: “Mrs.”³⁹²

It was this sense of transformation, the power of stepping into the role of the princess, even for a day, that made the Cinderella myth a natural fit for brides on their wedding days. The fairy-tale princess was (and is) an extraordinarily potent image for women

³⁸⁸ Ibid., 45.

³⁸⁹ "Stage, Screen Offers Made Miss America," *ACDP*, 11 Sep 1933, 1. in A.R. Riverol, *Live from Atlantic City: The History of the Miss America Pageant before, after and in Spite of Television* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1992), 30.

³⁹⁰ Letter from Marian Bergeron in Riverol, *Live from Atlantic City: The History of the Miss America Pageant before, after and in Spite of Television*, 31.

³⁹¹ Iset Anuakan, "Princess Literature and the Miss America Pageant," in *There She Is, Miss America: the Politics of Sex, Beauty and Race in America's Most Famous Pageant*, ed. Elwood Watson and Darcy Martin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 114, 16.

³⁹² "'Miss Washington of 1938' Wins a New Title -- 'Mrs.'" *The Washington Post*, June 2 1940, 14.

and girls in popular culture at large. The weddings of real-life royal women had, of course, held a long fascination in American history. The white wedding form itself, as argued in chapter 2, can be traced back in part to emulation of the weddings of Queen Victoria and her family. In the mid-twentieth century, the weddings of Princess Elizabeth (eventually Queen Elizabeth II) in 1947 and Princess Margaret in 1960, as well as the 1956 marriage of Hollywood star Grace Kelly to the Prince of Monaco, fuelled intense media coverage and popular imitation of wedding gown design. The wedding industry and prescriptive literature presented women with a host of appeals to the regal: references to the “slim princess bride who looks as if she had stepped from a modern fairy tale of fashion,”³⁹³ to “Duchess Satin,”³⁹⁴ to “story-book brides,”³⁹⁵ or to wedding gowns cut in a “Princess style” or modeled on the bridal attire of real-life princesses.³⁹⁶ The tiara or crown, very similar to those worn by Miss America pageant winners in the same era, became a fashionable bridal headdress, sometimes studded with pearls or jewels and anchoring a frothy veil (IMAGE 8).

Although some talked about “fairy tale weddings” more generally, the wedding of the mythic character Cinderella came to occupy a special place in wedding talk. The Western folk tale Cinderella (also known by Cap o’Rushes, Cat-skin, and many other names) is at least centuries old, with written versions dating back to the sixteenth century, and has so many close analogues in so many cultures that its origins are hard to pinpoint, although some folklorists have argued it originated in the East and spread westward.³⁹⁷ As with any popularly transmitted narrative, the story has always been freely adapted for particular

³⁹³ "Advertisement for the May Company Bridal Salon," *Los Angeles Times*, May 12 1932, 10.

³⁹⁴ "Jelleff's Advertisement," S5.

³⁹⁵ Peggy Preston, "Story Book Fashions Capture Brides' Fancy," *The Washington Post*, March 31 1948, B6.

³⁹⁶ Gloria Emerson, "Many Years of Careful Planning Are Behind Every Girl's Wedding," *New York Times*, June 24 1960, 18.

³⁹⁷ Jane Yolen, "America's Cinderella," in *Cinderella, a Folklore Casebook*, ed. Alan Dundes (New York: Garland Pub., 1982), xiv,xv,4.

contexts— both so that it makes sense to its audience and also so that it resonates with a given culture’s fascinations, mysteries, and anxieties. The story typically centers on a female protagonist who struggles against the injustice of an oppressive family and ultimately is triumphant. The version recorded by French author Charles Perrault in 1697 (“Cinderella, or the Little Glass Slipper”) is among the most influential Western versions, adding the details of the fairy godmother and the glass slippers.³⁹⁸ Perrault’s version praised Cinderella’s subservient nature, in line with 17th century notions of feminine virtue, but even in his version – and especially in other older versions of the tale – the traditional heroine showed signs of being a rather crafty, determined figure, making sure she had the upper hand against her stepsisters, teasing them with riddles, disguising herself, and showing an interest in wooing the Prince.³⁹⁹ In the 19th century, mass market novels in the United States began presenting a version of Perrault’s heroine more in line with the Cult of True Womanhood: a passive figure, kind and selfless, whose fortune was changed not by her own insistence but because of a benevolent godmother and a prince.⁴⁰⁰

This version of the heroine was taken to a new, ubiquitous level in the twentieth century in Walt Disney’s 1950 film version of *Cinderella*. The Cinderella of the Disney film was good-looking, kind, patient, somewhat dreamy – and rather remarkably without agency, something noted even by the not-especially-feminist film critics of the time. In the Disney version, nothing of the plot was brought about by the heroine’s own action. She depended entirely upon the machinations of her mice and bird buddies, as well as her Fairy Godmother, to get her to the ball, get her dressed, and finally to reveal her true identity to

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 14-15.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 296-97.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 301-02.

the Prince.⁴⁰¹ The Disney Cinderella was the sort of nice girl one wanted to help, but not the sort of girl who helped herself.⁴⁰²

The release of Cinderella was greeted with great fanfare in the winter of 1950, not least because it had been eight years since a full-length animated Disney feature film had been released due to production restrictions during the Second World War.⁴⁰³ The film was well received by critics although it was consistently observed that the animal characters were more fun and believable than the heroine, who was a “bit artificial,”⁴⁰⁴ or more like a “cartoon strip ideal female than a personality on her own.”⁴⁰⁵ Despite this, however, Cinderella was immediately popular with audiences and was the theme of fundraising balls,⁴⁰⁶ parties, and the “teen-age shop” of some department stores, who rushed to sell shoes named “Clock,” “Pumpkin Coach,” “Magic Wand,” and (of course) “Princess” to tie into the film’s release.⁴⁰⁷

The film was also immediately incorporated into the marketing of weddings (IMAGE 9). Just weeks after the film’s release, Filene’s department store held a bridal fashion show themed around the movie, transforming a local ballroom into a “fairy-tale setting,” with blown-up photographs of the film on the walls and a costumed Cinderella. After models showed off the bridal fashions of the season, a “tall, handsome ‘prince’” appeared at the end of the runway with a glass slipper and carried the model portraying Cinderella off stage. After an interlude of clips from the movie and more runway time, the

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 302-03.

⁴⁰² Walt Disney Company and Buena Vista Home Video (Firm), *Cinderella* (Burbank, CA: Buena Vista Home Video, 1949), 2 videodiscs (76 min).

⁴⁰³ Disney’s *Song of the South*, in 1946, was a live-action film combined with animation.

⁴⁰⁴ E.F.M., "'Cinderella' at Keith's," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 16 1950, 5.

⁴⁰⁵ Richard L. Coe, "The Animals Steal Cinderella's Show," *The Washington Post*, February 25 1950, 4.

⁴⁰⁶ "Heart Fund Will Gain: Cinderella Ball on Monday to Open Group's 1950 Campaign," *New York Times*, February 8 1950, 30.

⁴⁰⁷ "Cinderella Slippers for Teen-Ager Shown," *New York Times*, February 20 1950, 35.

show concluded with the model dressed as Cinderella returning in sumptuous bridal attire, “a vision of loveliness in her gown of white lace redingote studded with sequins over white net with matching headdress of white net and sequins.” As she entered into a carriage with her Prince, the audience was told she was going “to live happily ever after.”⁴⁰⁸ While there was no doubt that the Prince himself was key to this pageant Cinderella’s happiness, it is notable that the coverage of the event devotes two adjectives to him (“tall, handsome”) and many more to the description of Cinderella’s wedding attire, the revelation of which was intended to be the real climax of the fashion show.

What did twentieth century audiences find so irresistible about the Disney Cinderella, who, as the critics observed, was arguably a relatively uninteresting character? What was appealing to the bride about the fairy-tale princess, and what was the magic in the associations with royalty? In the twentieth century, encouraged by the Disney film and subsequent adaptations, Cinderella became a story about transformation brought about by beautiful clothing. When her external attire matched her internal beauty, she was transformed into an ethereal princess. The Princess archetype carried with it many qualities desirable to women, but perhaps the most consistent theme was that it was, after all, an image of power – albeit power that comes without overt action on the part of the heroine and power that allows her to guard the virtues of selflessness and modesty. In fact, the power of the fairy-tale princess to affect her will upon men and other women was always carefully cushioned by an emphasis on her patience, humility and kindness. The princess was powerful, but she was also *nice*.

In part, the American Cinderella story was about upward mobility. The meritocratic ideology of the American dream, much believed by the 1950s, went like this: if a man applied

⁴⁰⁸ Betty Driscoll, "'Cinderella' Stars at Bridal Gowns Show," *Christian Science Monitor*, February 24 1950, 4.

himself to hard work (and did not spend too frivolously), there was no structural barrier to his achieving the highest heights and enjoying the fruits of financial success: the comforts of love, home and family. The United States was an “aristocracy of talent and virtue,” as Thomas Jefferson put it, where there were no princes or kings, only deserving men well-rewarded. While some may have been born smarter or stronger or more attractive, these distinctions could be overcome through determination; all men were created equal in terms of the scope of their opportunities. The meritocratic myth was never really true, of course; for one, there were always some glaring aspects of social location (race, class, sexuality) that were not accounted for. Before the 1960s it was rarely observed that this was a *gendered* mythology: a model for young men of all classes that was not especially applicable to women of any class, even in the heady days of G.I. Bill subsidies. Men gained advantage on the marriage market through their financial success, which was assumed to come through hard work. Yet this sort of hard work would not bring women the same prize. The promotion at the office, the college degree, the comfortable salary – for middle-class white women, these were as often considered detriments on the marriage markets as advantages – or at very least they were simply irrelevant.

In the nineteenth century, the moral character of a woman and her accomplishments were valued traits for a future spouse and certainly these traits still held value in the twentieth century. But by the mid-twentieth century, the idea of beauty as an achievable ideal through consumption was pervasive, and young women were reminded again and again that prospective husbands looked for wives who were *pretty* – as well as well-groomed, cheerful, and selfless, not the sort who would put their own ambitions ahead of their husband. The American dream for women was in many ways not a story of democratic equality and individual accomplishment. Women seemed to gain significant advantage on the marriage

market, which for them was also the economic market, from physical loveliness – a quality that was determined in some part, for good or ill, at birth. Rather than making their own fate in the marketplace, a woman was trapped in a fixed fate and would be rewarded in power and happiness accordingly.

The marketplace attempted to democratize beauty by suggesting to woman that in fact, beauty could be obtained and inborn advantages evened out. Not, surely, through putting in extra hours in the warehouse or studying one's Latin or military service but through properly ordered consumption: of hair products, of rouge, of fashionable clothing, of flattering brassieres. Female upward mobility seemed to hinge on precisely the kind of frivolous spending that a successful man was supposed to avoid. Entrepreneurs of beauty products recognized, and played upon, the desire of women to be loved, admired and married.

The American dream of *feminine* upward mobility was reflected in the myth of Cinderella, who moved from humiliating poverty to princely privilege through the powerful effect of her beauty. The rags-to-riches success angle was not always a prominent aspect of the Cinderella myth. Perrault's 1697 version of the story emphasized that Cinderella was not truly a lowly peasant girl, but a noblewoman in disguise, and the story was not so much about a peasant who becomes a princess as it was about good breeding showing through bad circumstances. But this was not the theme seized upon by Disney and others in the twentieth century. Disney's Cinderella was a deserving girl who lacked power because she lacked the right *things*, and she was transformed by a fairy godmother who could provide them. Later in the twentieth century, some feminists (and pop psychologists) would argue that Cinderella was an unfortunate role model for young women because she depended upon a man to improve her life. But the transformation depicted in Disney's

Cinderella was not simply about the Prince (who did not interact with Cinderella at all until late in the film and structurally functioned more as her reward than her savior). It was about the *Fairy Godmother*, who served as a magical, kindly, knowledgeable feminine personification of the marketplace, stepping in to provide accessories and shoes. Indeed, most of the drama of the Disney film revolves around clothing. On the night of the ball, Cinderella's humiliation reached a climax when her cruel stepsisters destroyed a beautiful dress her mice and bird friends had made for her, greedily grabbing handfuls of jewelry and sashes and fabric directly off of her person. When her Fairy Godmother finally arrived to turn around her fortunes, the first magical steps were to create a glittering coach, coachmen and horses out of the unglamorous stuff of an everyday farm (pumpkin, mice, horse, dog) during the song "Bibbidi Boppidi Boo." But it was when the Fairy Godmother lifted her wand, murmuring "something simple, but daring too", and changed Cinderella's rags to a shimmering ball gown that the real and most dramatic transformation occurred. In contrast, Cinderella's first meeting with the Prince at the ball was relatively downplayed; the audience cannot even hear what they say to one another. When provided with the right outfit and the right vehicle, the American Cinderella was transformed into someone unrecognizable even to her own family, and then she was lovely enough to captivate the prince at first sight.

Of course, the Disney film and other versions emphasized that Cinderella was *always* really physically lovely, even under the ashes and dirt in humble surroundings, and this "diamond in the rough" motif was a favorite of beauty advertisers in the twentieth century, too. One consumed beauty products to bring out one's own natural beauty, not to deceive with artifice. One must not emulate Cinderella's stepsisters, who piled on too much accoutrement in a comically inept way to hide their hideousness; it was better to be a deserving girl who simply had not been provided the right dress. In this theme and others,

the Cinderella story also conflated physical beauty and moral virtue: those who were poorly behaved were also physically unattractive (like the ungainly, unfeminine stepsisters) and those who were virtuous were sweet-faced and graceful, like Cinderella or her Prince. There was a popular theodicy at work here: if a girl was cursed with a big nose, stout figure or eyesight that required glasses, this reflected not bad fortune but her own wrongdoing, which justified her disadvantage in society in a much more satisfying way. It might be as simple as her failure to take care of her own appearance: her unwillingness to use the right beauty products, to invest in girdles, deodorant, makeup or permanent waves. Or her ugliness might be due to a kind of vanity on her part: an arrogant belief that she is so attractive she does not *need* to attend to her toilette. In this way female success was tied directly to the virtue of humility – a virtue that valued diligent consumption over labor and a virtue that favored a constant monitoring of one’s own appearance. In advertising, the wedding could serve the function of showing a woman who had consumed so skillfully that she was a beautiful princess: no longer a girl but an adult woman.

Indeed, the Cinderella wedding was a ritual that enacted and perpetuated twentieth century understandings of what *turned* a girl into an adult woman. The bride on her wedding day, like Cinderella, was viewed as necessarily transformed into what she had not previously been, someone so much more beautiful than herself that it began to require a “rehearsal” of the bride’s beauty regimen in advance.⁴⁰⁹ The Disney Cinderella (and others) can be read as a story about female adolescence: the dirty and invisible girl is transformed through no effort of her own into a woman attractive enough to draw the eye of a prince, and that same transformation was part of the appeal of the wedding day for women. The transformation

⁴⁰⁹ John Roberts Powers, "Brides-to-Be Urged to Rehearse Beauty," *Los Angeles Times*, May 25 1952, D9.

could happen through the consumption of particular beauty products, but this was better viewed as Fairy Godmother-style magic than as self-interested effort on the part of the bride.

If there is a common thread to all of these images of women – Virgin Mary, angel, luminous being, fairy-tale princess – it is that they are images of nonspecific power, power wielded through symbolic beauty and not direct action. We are deep in the realm of the ideal here, and it is worth noting that, of course, many women married in this period did not experience their wedding days as dreamy days of transformation and feminine power. If the mass media and advertisers drew amply on these themes, it was because they struck a powerful chord, playing upon some understandings of ideal femininity that both preexisted the marketplace and were amplified by it, not because they were reflecting reality. Still, the ideal imagery around the American wedding day was influential, and as will be argued in the following chapter, would become deeply entwined with American Christian understandings of marriage and weddings. One reason for this was that the wedding took on a new religious function during the World Wars, adding civil religious significance to its other constellations of sacred meanings. Another was that the wedding was fast becoming a widely shared American ideal, somewhat immune even to differences of race, ethnicity, class or religion.

Every American girl loves a wedding

The title of this dissertation, taken from a line from the film *Father of the Bride* (1950), is not what “upper middle class white girls dream of,” but “what *every* girl dreams of.” This language never matched the imagery of wedding advertising, which depicted a world that was almost entirely white, upper-middle class, and Christian. But it does reflect an emerging ideology surrounding the white wedding: that *every single girl* was entitled to the fuss and feathers of a special day. As we have seen, the lavish white wedding of the nineteenth

century originated and was most popular in the Anglo-American Protestant upper and middle class. This was also the group most likely to be able to afford it – although certainly many who were not white and economically privileged did participate in versions of the ritual, too. Wedding marketers of the twentieth century, looking for the broadest market possible, emphasized the notion that a lavish white wedding belonged to everyone, a message consistent with democratic ideologies and the American variant of the Cinderella myth. Advertisements claimed that every woman “dreams at a wedding of the bride that she will be,” and later relived her own wedding day, “those sacred moments when her own world revolved to music and then stood breathtakingly still.”⁴¹⁰ By the 1950s, advertisers maintained that every woman desired a white wedding, even if virtually all advertising images of brides were white, Christian and upper-middle class.

Part of the process of this democratization was the emphasis of the white wedding (and especially the wholesome white American bride) as something sweetly all-American, a cheerful expression of cultural identity. In the burst of nationalism that accompanied the First and Second World Wars, as the last chapter argued, wartime weddings began to be discussed as rituals that had patriotic significance. This was in part an association explicitly encouraged by the wedding industry, which saw opportunity in the marriage boom during the Second World War. In 1940-41, with startling directness, a DeBeers trade ad in the *Department Store Economist* compelled jewelers to pay attention to how wartime could affect attitudes towards marriage with the headline: “Defense is in cahoots with Cupid!” The ad went on to point out:

Youths in strange new khaki leave in trains and their beloved wave good-bye ... eyes shining with love, the tokens of their pledges sparkling on engagement fingers. Young love finds a new urgency. The diamond business booms. Are you getting your share? Are you pushing diamonds in local

⁴¹⁰ “The Shop Scout Congratulates Brides of Today,” *The Washington Post*, May 17 1942, S9.

newspaper space, in windows, in counter displays, on the radio? With marriages increasing and the eye-compelling diamond advertising campaign continuing to sell this precious gem in major magazines, there are profits to be made *now*.⁴¹¹

The “new urgency” of love in wartime meant many marriage decisions made quickly, and that could only be good for the diamond business, which quickly produced images of all-American weddings in small town churches to promote engagement rings during wartime. But what would more spartan wartime weddings do to the rest of the bridal industry?

During the First World War, brides were called upon to sacrifice lavish wedding plans because of the circumstances of war, something viewed as heroic and patriotic. In the 1940s similar expectations existed, but with some differences. While it was still likely that weddings would be affected by the war, wedding experts stressed that white weddings were still possible. Indeed, *no* wartime circumstance was dire enough that a couple could not have a “real wedding,” some claimed.⁴¹² The advice columnist Bettina Bedwell suggested in 1942 that there was no need for brides to “wear clothing that could pass for a lot of other things besides getting married,” when so many wedding salons had clothing for wedding ensembles “all tuned to harmony for the wedding pageant done, if necessary, on a 48 hour preparation.”⁴¹³ In fact, the wartime circumstances suggested a special obligation to make the wedding as perfect as possible. For women married to servicemen, DeBeers advertisements claimed, “the memory of her solemn wedding ceremony in her own church is the young wife’s deepest assurance.”⁴¹⁴ In 1944, one newspaper advised brides-to-be that informal weddings were “unpopular” with enlisted men, who preferred “their girls adorned with clouds of misty veiling, skirts that are wide and full and trail behind, lace, ruffles, and all the

⁴¹¹ "DeBeers Trade Advertisement," (N W Ayer Advertising Agency Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, 1940).

⁴¹² Jane Holt, "For a Wartime Wedding," *New York Times*, April 12 1942, SM22.

⁴¹³ Bettina Bedwell, "Bettina Bedwell Says," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 21 1942, E5.

⁴¹⁴ "DeBeers Diamond Engagement Ring Advertisement," (1943).

fuss and frou frou of pre-war weddings.”⁴¹⁵ Who would deny a serviceman on leave a bride in an “old-fashioned” wedding dress? Who could deny a war bride the wedding that every girl dreamed of and every girl deserved?

In 1942, a recently married war bride wrote to an advice columnist expressing sorrow that at war weddings, bridal couples seemed less likely to receive gifts. “It’s not fair to us, who have had to forego the pomp and ceremony we dearly love, and all the glory of walking down the aisle, to have to forfeit our wedding gifts,” argued the “Very Disappointed Bride.” The columnist agreed and affirmed that young brides and grooms in wartime had a right to “whatever happiness they can grab.” War couples deserved special treatment, the columnist suggested, as their sacrifices gave them a status that “should lie pretty close to our hearts and pocketbooks.”⁴¹⁶ War weddings might be rushed – and they might be of questionable wisdom, as many worried in both world wars that war marriages would not last – but there was no reason they could not be the weddings that “every girl” dreamed of.

This same idea, that weddings were occasions dreamed about and then “treasured for life by all the race of women,” was continually promoted and restated in wedding advertising and prescriptive literature until the late 1960s. But as films like *The Catered Affair* pointed out, not “every girl” was the white, upper-class Episcopalian character in *Father of the Bride*. One way to understand how pervasive the “every girl” white wedding notion was is to examine how the weddings of outsider groups – “outsider” in terms of race, ethnicity, religion and class – were affected by the ideology. Even for groups who did not fit neatly into the white wedding ideal promoted by advertisers, the tendency was to match the dominant wedding norms as closely as possible, at least until the late 1960s and early 1970s.

⁴¹⁵ Rea Seeger, “Old Fashioned Bridal Gown Is Still the Thing,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, March 17 1944, 17.

⁴¹⁶ Doris Blake, “Giftless War Wedding Has Bride Unhappy,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 14 1942, C7.

The wedding practices of African Americans varied considerably over time and by region and were notoriously ignored by the wedding industry even as late as the 1990s. Many African American brides and grooms had adopted aspects of the white wedding ideal since the days of legal slavery – although certainly in circumstances of slavery and poverty, the option of “lavishness” was not commonly available. Accounts of nineteenth-century African American weddings incorporating white dresses, veils and other ritual details are fairly common, even when the wedding took place in constrained circumstances. In 1856, the white slaveowner Mary Jones described the parlor wedding of her slaves in her journal. Although the ceremony was simple and dependent upon Jones’s permission and participation, it shared characteristics in common with white Victorian weddings: “bride and bridesmaid in swiss muslins with white wreaths on their heads, [the groom and groomsman] in broadcloth and white gloves.” After the ceremony was over, Jones described inviting the bridal party and gathered witnesses into the kitchen to “partake of a hot breakfast” as a wedding reception.⁴¹⁷ In 1905, a white plantation owner in South Carolina remarked that her African American servant Gertie was “enchanted” with preparing for her wedding, obsessed over the latest wedding fashions, and that “not to comply with what is just the last touch of elegance for a bride would be terrible to Gertie.”⁴¹⁸ By the 1930s, urban African American society weddings were often quite elaborate, and middle-class African American church weddings often involved white gowns, elaborate flowers, attendants and a catered reception. Indeed, because many middle class African Americans, particularly in the South, had a particular interest in respectability and legitimacy, wedding etiquette and form was

⁴¹⁷ Mary Jones Jones, "Letter from Mary Jones Jones to Charles Colcock Jones, January 31, 1856," in *The Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War*, ed. Robert M. Myers (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972), 186.

⁴¹⁸ Elizabeth Waties Allston Pringle, "Diary of Elizabeth Waties Allston Pringle, December, 1905," in *A Woman Rice Planter*, ed. Cornellius O. Cathey (Cambridge, MA: Macmillan & Co., 1922), 254.

considered very important. African American newspapers covered wedding preparations and celebrations frequently and often, and by the 1950s, national magazines such as *Ebony* reported on “fabulous Negro weddings.”⁴¹⁹ By this period, most middle-class African American brides probably considered the etiquette-dictated white wedding to be a time-honored African American tradition of church, community and family.

During some slave weddings, the well-known custom of “jumping the broom” served as an indicator of marriage, a practice apparently adapted from a similar tradition among white Scots-Irish slaveowners.⁴²⁰ However, slaves were also married in many other ways: by white ministers, by their masters, by other slaves, by placing their hands on a Bible and saying vows. After the end of slavery, “jumping the broom” was not typically part of African American weddings until the rise of interest in claiming black identity during the 1960s and 1970s. As a general rule, prior to the 1960s, African Americans did not tend to emphasize ethnic distinctiveness in the wedding ritual. In the early twentieth century the tendency was for African Americans (and for other outsider groups) to adopt dominant white, Protestant, middle-class norms surrounding marriage and the wedding day.

For recent immigrants, the wedding day could be a time to pay homage to traditions of the land of origin, but it could also be an opportunity to signal the bride’s identity as a fashionable and modern America woman as well as to indicate her family’s success in the United States.⁴²¹ Many culturally and religiously specific customs, such as the German Lutheran tradition of all-male attendants at a wedding, lost out to the appeal of the white

⁴¹⁹ "Ebony Advertisement," *Chicago Daily Defender*, September 17 1958, 7.

⁴²⁰ Alan Dundes, "Jumping the Broom!: On the Origin and Meaning of an African American Wedding Custom," *The Journal of American Folklore* 109 (1996): 324-29.

⁴²¹ Elizabeth Hafkin Pleck, *Celebrating the Family : Ethnicity, Consumer Culture, and Family Rituals* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000), 226, 27.

wedding in the nineteenth century.⁴²² While some immigrant neighborhoods continued the practices of large, raucous, days-long community weddings into the 1940s, by mid-century most second or third-generation immigrants considered a more decorous white wedding and reception the form of choice.⁴²³ In fact, after the Immigration Quota Act of 1924 restricted the numbers of immigrants entering into the country, some wedding dress manufacturers glumly regretted the decline of two-day wedding celebrations in which the brides sought an elaborate “Christmas tree decorative effect” for their dresses.⁴²⁴

The tendency to adopt Anglo-Protestant white wedding practices was true even for groups who had religious motivations for maintaining differences. Eastern European Jewish immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century arrived in the United States accustomed to wedding practices that shared a few features in common with American white weddings (rings, bridal veil, cake) but were also very different kinds of occasions, often performed outside in gender-segregated celebrations. They were very rarely held in synagogues, a location that would have been considered inappropriate and disrespectful to the holy building. Jewish brides, even first generation immigrants, in the early twentieth century frequently were married in white dresses, and middle-class Jewish families overwhelmingly adapted to the solemn commercial American white wedding. By 1922 one Jewish periodical worried that Jewish weddings no longer contained “very much that was Jewish,” and lamented that the *chuppah*, the canopy under which Jewish brides and grooms are traditionally married, was “too often discarded ... by folks who think that ancient institutions are a sign of inferiority.”⁴²⁵ Several decades later, the conservative rabbinate of

⁴²² Ibid., 225.

⁴²³ Ibid., 228.

⁴²⁴ Bertram Reintz, “Bridal Overhead Is Now Reduced,” *New York Times*, May 20 1928, 124.

⁴²⁵ “Jewish Social Life of Today: With the Chuppah, Much of Old-Time Wedding Liveliness Has Departed,” *The Jewish Criterion*, March 10 1922, 11.

Pittsburgh specifically urged Jewish brides and grooms to be married in a synagogue. This had several advantages, the rabbis argued, emphasizing tradition and religious meaning for the Jewish wedding, making kosher food at the reception an easier proposition, and representing “the American tradition for public weddings to be held in a house of worship.”⁴²⁶ In this sense American Jews also brought wedding into the doors of the sacred building, echoing the 19th century churching of the Protestant wedding.

Another example of a religiously-specific wedding ritual that stood in tension with commercial white weddings was the “temple marriage” of the Latter-day Saints. Although it was possible for LDS members to be married in other ways, members of the LDS Church in good standing were encouraged to be married within a temple building, in a particular “sealing” ritual that was not talked about with outsiders and represented a marriage for eternity, not simply for the span of a lifetime.⁴²⁷ The LDS marriage ritual (which remains “secret” today in the sense that participants are asked not to discuss it) was markedly different from the mainstream Protestant white wedding. There was no exchange of rings, no processions of flower girls, bridesmaids and bride, no *Lobengrin*, no bridal veil permitted during the ceremony, no church decorated with the bride’s choice of flowers. Family members or friends who were not LDS could not witness any part of the religious ceremony, nor enter the inner temple space at all, something that could cause problems for brides and grooms who had converted and had families who were not members. To be able to participate in a temple ceremony, considered a very special and set-apart practice, adult men

⁴²⁶ Benjamin A.; Cohen Lichter, Seymour J.; Hailperin, Herman and Miller, Pincus, "Announcement by the Conservative Rabbinate of Pittsburgh Concerning Prohibited and Permitted Dates for Weddings," *The Jewish Criterion*, March 6 1953, 30.

⁴²⁷ In the nineteenth century, the temple marriage was not practical for every American Latter Day Saint, as before 1900 there were only four dedicated temples, all in Utah. By 1950, there were eight in the United States, and by the 1970s, there were 16 American temples, including one in Washington, D.C. and two in California. The greater the number of temples (there were approximately 130 in 2009), the more temple marriage was expected and encouraged by leadership.

and women needed a “temple recommend,” or a form signed by a local bishop who could refer them as worthy and prepared to enter the temple. Those who were not active members of the church (as well as LDS children, youth, most unmarried LDS women and a few others) were not eligible to receive recommends. There was, then, no equivalent semi-public moment of the bride walking down the aisle in a white dress and veil for all to see. While this certainly did not seem to discourage devout LDS women from wanting to participate in temple weddings,⁴²⁸ it did mean that LDS women could not always obviously incorporate mass market white wedding practices into their wedding days.

Yet the middle of the twentieth century was a time when Latter-day Saint communities, too, tended to veer towards assimilation with mainstream American practices,⁴²⁹ and families found ways to incorporate elements of the mass market white wedding without religious conflict. By the 1960s, Utah newspapers regularly printed wedding announcements describing LDS temple weddings as “double-ring ceremonies,” usually referring to a ring ceremony held on the steps of the temple, at the reception, or in a separate ceremony within the temple. Although the exchange of rings was understood to be “strictly a social custom,” it was helpful as a way to gesture to dominant American wedding norms and to potentially allow for non-LDS guests to participate in some aspect of the wedding ritual.⁴³⁰ Mid-century LDS temple weddings also adopted the practices of having attendants (men and women with temple recommends) who witnessed, although did not participate, in the temple ordinances. LDS brides and grooms had no religious restrictions involving registering at department stores or holding receptions with caterer and cake

⁴²⁸ Boyd Carter Rollins, "Factors Influencing the Decisions of Latter-Day Saint Youth Concerning the Selection of a Temple or Non-Temple Type of Marriage Ceremony." (Masters, Brigham Young University, 1958).

⁴²⁹ Armand L. Mauss, *The Angel and the Beehive : The Mormon Struggle with Assimilation* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

⁴³⁰ Orville C. Gunther, "How Do Wedding Rings Enter into the Temple Ceremony?," *New Era*, June 1978, 30-31.

although the requirement to abstain from alcohol did rule out champagne toasts. Because women (and men) wore particular clothing as part of the temple ordinances and due to LDS modesty requirements in general, most off-the-rack wedding dresses did not work for LDS brides, so LDS women were more likely to make their own dresses. Over time, LDS-specific wedding dress entrepreneurs in Utah, including the church-owned department store ZCMI, began to offer women “modest” wedding dresses to change into for their receptions only or “temple-ready” bridal gowns they could wear for both ceremony and reception. Especially in Utah a distinct etiquette developed around temple weddings, and stationers advertised “temple wedding announcements” for sale in LDS women’s magazines.⁴³¹ In the mid-twentieth century, the tendency in LDS communities was to affirm that although the formal religious significance of the temple marriage was to be preserved, LDS women could have an all-American white wedding without troubling their consciences.

This vaguely aristocratic ritual of pageantry, etiquette and soaring expense was marketed to everyone, but, of course, there would always be women who could not afford the wedding that “every girl dreams of,” whatever their religious or ethnic background. As weddings became more expensive, the more there appeared to be a heightened interest in budget affairs, or weddings that purported to offer the same magical experience on a smaller scale. Bridal experts in newspapers firmly lectured brides that it was “illogical” to spend too much on a wedding and that it was far better “to plan the affair well within means.” There was no reason a wedding could not be “lovely, sweet and impressive even though it is simple.”⁴³² One postwar expert in 1947 claimed that the “pageantry” of war weddings, which had as many as twelve bridesmaids, was now giving way to “restraint in wedding plans,” with

⁴³¹ "Rexcraft Temple Wedding Announcements " *Relief Society Magazine* 1962, 710.

⁴³² Helen Bartlett, "Don't Spend All Wedding Funds on Bride's Gown," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, May 1 1938, D2.

only two to four.⁴³³ (This was a unique take on war wedding, which were usually presumed to be somewhat less elaborate.) And as had been the case in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, magazines and newspapers were quick to assure readers that there was nothing wrong with a simple, understated wedding for those who could not afford otherwise.

But cutting wedding costs was typically a subject discussed with some ambivalence. It was desirable to be frugal if one needed to be, but cheapness was judged harshly as well. Take, for example, the advice of Abigail Van Buren, whose daily column took off in popularity in the 1960s and who responded to wedding-related questions with regularity, as often as weekly. In 1965, a woman writing a letter to Dear Abby asked why parents were considered “selfish and inconsiderate” when they did not want to go into debt to throw a wedding reception for their daughter. Echoing Stanley Banks in *Father of the Bride*, the letter writer insisted that she and the bride’s father had “always lived within our means,” and were perfectly willing to pay for a party – but that their daughter was “not satisfied with the kind of reception we can afford. “ Abby assured the anxious mother that she had nothing to apologize for as “[s]ensible people do not spend more than they can afford on anything. And that includes wedding receptions.”⁴³⁴ Yet the year before, answering a different sort of question, Abby emphasized another set of values. The 1964 letter writer related that he or she had made the suggestion that two family members getting married the same summer have a double wedding in order to “save on flowers, music, food, drinks, etc.” The letter writer’s family members had responded coldly to the suggestion, insisting that “if they had to buy two wedding presents, they expected to go to two weddings.” “What,” asked the letter

⁴³³ "Budget Brides," *The Washington Post*, June 7 1947, 8.

⁴³⁴ Abigail Van Buren, "Losing Daughter, Gaining a Debt?," *Los Angeles Times*, April 18 1965, D5.

writer, “is wrong with my family? Or is it me?” This time, the columnist did not affirm that saving money on weddings was sensible, but responded curtly: “Your suggestion was motivated by your desire to get as much mileage out of a dollar as possible. So was their reaction. It must run in your family.” Strongly implied was Abby’s disapproval of stinginess and valuing saving money over the sentiment of the occasion.⁴³⁵ The difference between being fiscally sensible and being a cheapskate was a subtle one.

Wedding marketers did not explicitly target those who could not sensibly afford the white wedding, nor did they usually market explicitly to African Americans, recent immigrants, Jews, or Mormons. Yet all of these groups were affected by the expectation of magic of the white wedding day, and all were participants in white weddings even when some aspects needed to be adapted or remade. Put differently, the white wedding ideal was democratized even when the practices were not. Every girl was encouraged to be the fairy-tale princess on her wedding day, and in the American imagination, any girl could.

⁴³⁵ Abigail Van Buren, “Two for the Price of One,” *Los Angeles Times*, February 16 1964, J8.

**CHAPTER SIX:
Inviting God into your marriage: American Christians and the “worshipful” wedding,
1920-1970**

A country couple presented themselves before a justice of the peace to be married. The ceremony was brief, but the couple continued to stand there as if expecting something more. Slightly embarrassed, the justice attempted to round things off with a religious flavor by stammering, “There, now, it’s all over! Go and sin no more!”⁴³⁶

– *Esar’s Joke Dictionary*, 1945

By the mid-twentieth century, an American child might play with a wide array of toys and books themed around the white wedding, one indication of how morally unproblematic the lavish wedding day had become for most Americans. Brides and weddings were ubiquitous in products aimed at girls – including, in the 1950s and 1960s, books and toys that featured the wedding in the film *Cinderella*. Books marketed to girls and young women frequently featured wedding-related storylines. One picture book, 1964’s *Here Comes the Bride* by May Garelick, depicted little girls engaging in pretend play by planning an elaborate wedding; the girls imagined an event with multiple attendants, hundreds of guests and a six-piece orchestra.⁴³⁷ Dolls dressed as brides or bridesmaids, as well as separately-marketed dress-up bridal clothing for dolls, were also extremely popular. In 1947, for example, one could purchase the eleven-inch Lovely Sue doll costumed as Martha Washington, a nun, a bride or a bridesmaid, among other options.⁴³⁸ A set of paper dolls from the 1940s included an elegantly-costumed wedding party –female attendants with glamorous dresses and bouquets of flowers, as well as the groom and bride with both bridal and casual attire.⁴³⁹

The paper doll set also included another critical element of the wedding day: a gently smiling Protestant minister doll with prayer book in hand, presumably ready to be posed in

⁴³⁶ Evan Esar, ed., *Esar’s Joke Dictionary* (New York: Harvest House Publishers, 1945), 476.

⁴³⁷ May Garelick, *Here Comes the Bride* (New York: Young Scott Books, 1964).

⁴³⁸ “Lovely Sue Advertisement,” *New York Times*, October 19 1947. See also “Thrifty Drug Stores Advertisement,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 7 1952, 28.

⁴³⁹ “Bridal Costumes 1940s,” (Carolyn & Donald Grepke Paper Dolls Collection, Series 8, Fashion and Costume Subseries, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., box number 23, folder number 14).

an imaginary church to give his blessing. The paper doll minister signaled that the make-believe wedding was a “church wedding,” which continued to popularly imply a wedding with a certain level of formality and expense, much like the Episcopal wedding in *Father of the Bride*. One Depression-era newspaper article discussed an argument one bride and groom had over the size of their wedding. He wanted “a quiet little wedding,” and she wanted a “church wedding” – “not elaborate, but nice.”⁴⁴⁰ As was the case with the bride in *The Catered Affair*, those who did not have “church weddings” were presumed to have more subdued and less costly weddings – perhaps a ceremony that was sensibly simple and frugal or perhaps something suspiciously hasty. Yet despite this association with lavishness and fuss, the term “church wedding” did not lose its associations with piety and religiosity. In 1954, one magazine article advised that if a bride and groom wanted a church wedding, “[n]othing would please your minister more, even though it may take a good deal of his time.” After all, marriage was sacred, and having the ceremony in the church “lends an atmosphere of sacredness no minister overlooks.”⁴⁴¹ A church wedding was popularly understood to be both more sacred *and* more expensive.

Consistent with the trend continuing since the middle of the nineteenth century, most American couples in the mid-twentieth century were married in ceremonies officiated by clergy. According to one sociological study of weddings in 1939, clergymen married ninety percent of the approximately 150 couples interviewed, with two-thirds married in a church or parsonage. The author observed that those married in churches seemed to be much greater than the proportion of the population that belonged to a church. Admitting that this high incidence of religious involvement in weddings was something that ought to be

⁴⁴⁰ Doris Blake, “Lavish Wedding Often Is Source of Extravagance,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 10 1935, 19.

⁴⁴¹ “Don’t Be Afraid to Use Your Minister,” *Changing times: Kiplinger’s personal finance magazine*, May 1954, 45.

further explored, the author suggested that it might be due to reasons of social propriety, because brides and grooms knew clergymen personally, or because the presence of a minister had fewer associations with “commercialism.”⁴⁴²

That a sociologist would assume the presence of a minister implied fewer associations with “commercialism” attested to the sharp intellectual distinction many mid-twentieth century Americans, especially academics and clergy, made between the commercial and the sacred. But the practice of American wedding days suggested a different story altogether. By the 1950s, the white wedding had become an example of consumer culture and institutional religion in symbiosis. In this chapter, I will argue that churches had clear interests in church weddings, both because they seemed a surer route to stable marriages and families and because they seemed a promising way to keep couples churched. As a result, the twentieth century saw a new, cross-denominational emphasis on weddings as specifically Christian acts of worship, with meanings best appreciated and understood in a church setting. Of course the twentieth-century commercial white wedding encouraged its own set of possibly-competing sacred associations (the power of tradition and history, identification with divine feminine figures, the visible physical transformation of women), but often these associations were also incorporated into the Christian wedding and even sometimes given specifically Christian meanings. To be sure, religious writers expressed unease, confusion and ambivalence about the integration of the commercial and religious wedding. It was not only “outsider” religious groups that encountered conflicts with popular practices. As a whole, however, the mass market, fairy-tale wedding *was* a Christian wedding.

This chapter will first argue that church weddings continued to be important to Christian communities, not only because they offered reassuring symbolism, but because

⁴⁴² B.F. Timmons, "The Cost of Weddings," *American Sociological Review* 4, no. 2 (1939): 227.

they now were viewed as a practical way for churches to attempt to strengthen marriage and family relationships through premarital counseling conducted by ministers. Premarital counseling had the added benefit of potentially recommitting couples to religious participation, which was also considered a boon to strong marriages. Although marketers and etiquette books saw a direct link between religious weddings and lavish expense, it will be argued that most religious leaders framed the church wedding as a religious alternative to a commercial wedding. However, an examination of liturgical changes of the twentieth century will suggest Protestant friendliness, if not accommodation, to many commercial changes. And while clergy emphasized that showy weddings could compete with the wedding as religious experience, books by pastor's wives viewed the spectacle of the wedding day with more sympathy, offering a window into how lavish weddings were viewed and practiced at the congregational level. In conclusion, this chapter will look at how the moral meaning of the wedding day began to change in the 1950s and 1960s with the rise of a new style of wedding celebration, what Elizabeth Pleck has called the "postsentimental occasion."

Go and sin no more: the importance of church weddings

Chapter four addressed the question of why churches did not more forcefully object to the elaboration of the Christian wedding rite, and one important answer was that the wedding was symbolically important in the opposition of churches to divorce. Catholic and Protestant Christians continued to worry about the health of American marriages and families in the period 1920-1970, but more and more often identified congregational-level premarital counseling as the solution to the problem. As a result, the church wedding became a yet more important part of the Christian response to divorce and family problems.

Marriage, according to most Christian sources on the subject, was an undertaking associated with many risks and potential pitfalls. These dangers had “always been great,” according to one 1949 Protestant source, but were especially perilous in “our modern industrialized existence,” in which there was so little sense of community or accountability.⁴⁴³ Divorce was still the most feared and regretted outcome to a marriage, although pastors and religious leaders of the mid-twentieth century tended to have more sympathy for the tragic circumstances of unhappy marriages that led to divorce. One Episcopalian pastor admitted that while he did not remarry most divorced persons in accordance with his denomination, “when two people are utterly unlike, it is criminal to keep them together.”⁴⁴⁴ Nevertheless, when by 1965 one in four marriages was ending in divorce, most agreed that this struck “a crippling blow against the basic unit of church and society,” and was a problem for Christian communities to address.⁴⁴⁵

By the mid-twentieth century, Catholics and Protestants alike tended to stress the idea that the more a couple was prepared for a marriage rooted in their religious and moral convictions, the more likely they were to be able to handle the perils of a marital relationship with equanimity. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many Christians had called for political solutions to the problem of divorce, including laws making divorces more difficult to obtain. But by the 1940s, the strategy of most churches had shifted, and the preferred Christian solution to divorce was now premarital counseling and preparation conducted by the pastor. This was partially a change in emphasis in the understanding of the role of clergy. In the years following the Second World War, sensitive and skillful pastoral

⁴⁴³ Elton Trueblood, *The Common Ventures of Life* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1949), 59.

⁴⁴⁴ Randolph Ray, *Marriage Is a Serious Business* (New York: Whittlesey House, 1944), 102.

⁴⁴⁵ Donald Macleod, *Presbyterian Worship: Its Meaning and Method* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1965), 23.

counseling was increasingly viewed as a significant part of the job description for the Protestant minister.⁴⁴⁶ As one 1958 Methodist manual put it, when couples came to the church in “a star-studded, romantic obsession,” it was now up to the “pastor-counselor” to encourage realistic thinking, to educate them about what was necessary for a marriage to survive, and to impart the necessity of committing to not only a life together, but a mutual religious commitment.⁴⁴⁷ Thus pastoral counseling would not only insure that couples would be able to overcome the typical challenges of marriage (such as financial trouble, infidelity, or illness) but also encourage them to remain members of a church, an additional buttress to the health of their relationship. Denominations produced large quantities of pamphlets and booklets on marriage, sex and family for pastors to distribute in this capacity. These books and pamphlets were so similar across denominations that one 1961 author referred to them as an example of “Christian plagiarism.”⁴⁴⁸

Transmitting all of this knowledge to prospective brides and grooms was unquestionably a large job for clergy; indeed, one manual admitted that no minister would “ever feel properly and adequately prepared to be a good counselor.”⁴⁴⁹ Premarital counseling usually involved clergy encouraging couples to talk frankly about their expectations, their personal habits and their plans for career, children and religious participation. Clergy were often expected to provide information on the significance of the wedding itself, wedding planning, healthy ways of addressing marital conflict, sex education, answers to general religious questions, and a range of related subject matters. A variety of manuals were written for pastors, usually drawing on sociological and psychological research

⁴⁴⁶ E. Brooks Holifield, *God's Ambassadors : A History of the Christian Clergy in America* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2007), 241-242.

⁴⁴⁷ *The Pastor's Manual for Premarital Counseling*, (Nashville: The Methodist Publishing House, 1958), 23.

⁴⁴⁸ Sylvanus Milne Duvall and Evelyn M. Duvall, eds., *Sex Ways -- in Fact and Faith: Bases for Christian Family Policy* (New York: Association Press, 1961).

⁴⁴⁹ *The Pastor's Manual for Premarital Counseling*, 32.

to help them to adopt the correct approach. Most of the premarital counseling was assumed to happen after a couple was already engaged and intended to be married in the church, although everyone emphasized that really education about Christian marriage ought to be happening in churches all the time. Counseling sessions often happened weekly over a period of several weeks or months. Moreover, in the background of these counseling sessions loomed current social controversies involving marriage that churches hoped clergy might help address therapeutically. Premarital sex, which had been on a slow rise since the 1880s, had become an increasingly common and tacitly acknowledged practice among young people by the 1950s. (According to historian Stephanie Coontz, by the end of the 1950s heterosexual premarital sex was acceptable for men under most circumstances, and for most women if they were in love.)⁴⁵⁰ Pastors thus were encouraged to emphasize to engaged couples that the sex act was sacred, a commitment of a person's "total personality."⁴⁵¹ If a couple had engaged in premarital sex, a 1963 Catholic manual warned, serious introspection was called for, as they may well find their marriage plagued by "mutual accusations, recriminations and suspicions."⁴⁵² With the popularization of more effective birth control methods for women in the 1960s, contraception became another hot-button issue for Christian denominations. By 1970, almost sixty percent of all adult women (both single and married) were using the birth control pill or intrauterine devices.⁴⁵³ The Christian use of contraception was, accordingly, added to the list of subjects for the pastoral premarital counselor to discuss. Catholic priests were to stress that procreation was the primary end of marriage, and "any action that would frustrate this fundamental, biologically rooted purpose

⁴⁵⁰ Stephanie Coontz, *Marriage, a History : From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2005), 254.

⁴⁵¹ *The Pastor's Manual for Premarital Counseling*, 82.

⁴⁵² Clement Simon Mihanovich, Gerald J. Schnepp, and John L. Thomas, *A Guide to Catholic Marriage* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1963), 69.

⁴⁵³ Coontz, *Marriage, a History : From Obedience to Intimacy, or How Love Conquered Marriage*, 254.

of the marital act” was immoral.⁴⁵⁴ Protestant denominations, generally more friendly to contraception as a means of planning families, often expected pastors to educate couples about the “use of hygienically approved contraceptives” as “healthful and right” options for couples.⁴⁵⁵ In any case, premarital counseling by a congregational leader was viewed as the best way to address these questions among churchgoing couples.

An issue of particular Christian concern in the twentieth century was that of intermarriage, and nearly every manual on Christian marriage for clergy or laypeople alike included a lengthy discussion of the subject. Intermarriage in a church context was usually taken to mean marriage between those of different religious backgrounds – usually Protestant, Catholic, Jewish or “religiously unaffiliated” women and men.⁴⁵⁶ (Most mid-twentieth century Protestant denominations did not have strong objections to interdenominational marriage among Protestants.) That premarital counseling literature focused so much on this subject indicates that it was a rising “problem” of the twentieth century. But it also suggests that church weddings were functioning as mechanisms to point couples towards participation within their own religious traditions, to keep them active and within the fold. Religious literature about intermarriage tended to be very gloomy on the subject, pointing at statistics from the social sciences that showed lower rates of success in

⁴⁵⁴ Mihanovich, Schnepf, and Thomas, *A Guide to Catholic Marriage*, 259.

⁴⁵⁵ *The Pastor's Manual for Premarital Counseling*, 84. See also Duvall and Duvall, eds., *Sex Ways -- in Fact and Faith: Bases for Christian Family Policy*, 55..

⁴⁵⁶ Racial intermarriage, a hotly contested subject especially in the 1950s and 1960s, was not as prominent a topic in the premarital counseling literature, although it was occasionally addressed. Catholic sources tended to note the legal restrictions on racial intermarriage in some states and the social obstacles likely but stressed that the Church itself, as a “universal” church, did not have “the slightest objection” to interracial marriage. Protestants had a wider range of opinions on the subject, sometimes emphasizing that marriages with similar racial and cultural backgrounds were more likely to succeed, and others arguing that social restrictions to interracial marriage would likely fade over time and ought to be opposed by Christians. See Mihanovich, Schnepf, and Thomas, *A Guide to Catholic Marriage. The Pastor's Manual for Premarital Counseling*, 56.

marriages with different religious perspectives or rates of participation.⁴⁵⁷ Clergy were encouraged to point out potential difficulties: the problem of having to explain important rituals to the “outsider” spouse, the temptation of one spouse taking a “superior attitude,” the implicit dilemma of how to raise children.⁴⁵⁸ When a Catholic man or woman wanted a dispensation to marry a non-Catholic, the Roman Catholic Church had a firm policy: the non-Catholic spouse must agree not to interfere with the practice of Catholicism in any way, to agree to baptize and educate all children as Catholics, and to forswear any marriage ceremony involving anyone but a Catholic priest.⁴⁵⁹ This “dogmatic and antidemocratic” Catholic position tended to infuriate Protestant clergy, who warned Protestant men and women to be wary of permitting themselves “to be forced into an agreement which we hold to be unfair.”⁴⁶⁰ The best solution, from the perspective of Protestant and Catholic clergy alike, was for the non-member spouse to become a member: to convert. Other options were possible – but not encouraged – and this was often reflected in what kind of wedding interreligious couples were permitted to have. In the most formal example, even when Catholics had dispensations to marry non-Catholics, they were not permitted to be married with a nuptial blessing or a wedding Mass. This restriction was explicitly intended as a way for the Roman Catholic Church to show “displeasure regarding mixed marriage.”⁴⁶¹

Thus the church wedding could be understood not only a promising way that churches could affect the survival rates of Christian marriages but also as a means to channel couples into faithful Christian practice. For some Christian traditions (notably the Roman

⁴⁵⁷ *The Pastor's Manual for Premarital Counseling*, 63., James A. Pike, "Problems of Mixed Marriages," in *Sermons on Marriage and Family Life: Teachings from Protestant Pulpits Concerning the Christian Home*, ed. John Chalres Wynn (New York: Abingdon Press, 1961).

⁴⁵⁸ Pike, "Problems of Mixed Marriages." 158-162.

⁴⁵⁹ Mihanovich, Schnepf, and Thomas, *A Guide to Catholic Marriage*, 161.

⁴⁶⁰ *The Pastor's Manual for Premarital Counseling*, 67.

⁴⁶¹ Mihanovich, Schnepf, and Thomas, *A Guide to Catholic Marriage*, 159.

Catholic Church) the rite of marriage had always been a sacrament, a significant religious ritual in its own right. But all Christian denominations now emphasized the religious importance of the wedding day, albeit to different degrees. During the ceremony, “the stamp of approval of the Christian community is made,” according to one Protestant source. A wedding was a “religious occasion,” and though marriages made by justices of the peace might be legally sound, they were “spiritually impoverished.”⁴⁶² By the 1950s, the consensus seemed to be that Christians ought to be married in church weddings.

Anything that adds to the reverence: churches and popular wedding practices

For advertisers, the significance of the church wedding was clear: it was likely to result in more wedding-related consumption. Vague references to religious settings and symbols associated with the wedding day were very common in advertising. During the Depression, advertisements for bridal salons promised a wedding dress that would glow “in the dim inner recesses of the church.”⁴⁶³ For bridal fashion shows, department store auditoriums were transformed into “flower-banked, cathedral setting[s].”⁴⁶⁴ Most explicitly, NW Ayers designed a postwar ad campaign for DeBeers on the theme of grooms returning from the war to be married in their hometown churches and synagogues. In this series of print ads from the mid-to-late 1940s, themes of patriotism, romantic love, tradition and religious piety were tightly knit together. In a 1948 print ad, a painting of a New England church was partnered with copy assuring that weddings were “triumphant over winter, weariness and war,” and even now “up village church and great cathedral aisles young

⁴⁶² Trueblood, *The Common Ventures of Life*, 47, 48.

⁴⁶³ "Jelleff's Advertisement," *The Washington Post*, September 20 1936, S5.

⁴⁶⁴ Fay Hammond, "Short Wedding Dresses Featured at Bridal Show," *Los Angeles Times*, April 11 1950, B1.

couples pace the slow, traditional footsteps of their forebears.”⁴⁶⁵ In a relatively rare national-level appeal to religious identity in advertising, one series of ads featured weddings in identifiable religious traditions, including Greek Orthodox and Jewish weddings, showing illustrations of couples in religious settings with the groom in military dress. (The copy beneath the Jewish-themed ad: “At last they meet beneath a canopy to part no more... To light the tenderness of such a day, a diamond ring must flame with special purity and joy.”)⁴⁶⁶ By the mid-twentieth century, it was clear that weddings in religious settings served the interests of marketers. The association with institutional religion both added emotional value and encouraged more elaborate ceremonies.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Christian leaders did not frame the relationship between church weddings and commercialization in quite the same fashion. In books on wedding planning and in manuals on marriage, clergy (and, in many cases, their spouses) emphasized that the wedding had religious meanings that should not be overwhelmed by all the fuss and feathers. One Lutheran pastor put it quite sternly in a 1965 pamphlet, “Your wedding is not a show that you are staging to the envy of your friends; neither is it a pageant to elicit the praise of your beauty; nor is it a modeling session for the delight of the candid-camera bug.”⁴⁶⁷ Another clergyman cautioned against civil ceremonies, as they “tend to show and display, indeed even vulgar exhibitionism.” Christians ought to be married in a church, the author stressed, apparently unaware of the showy reputation church weddings could have. One important goal of premarital counseling was to emphasize the solemnity and religious significance of the wedding itself. “I always read through the wedding service with a young

⁴⁶⁵ “DeBeers Diamond Engagement Ring Advertisement,” (N W Ayer Advertising Agency Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, 1948).

⁴⁶⁶ “DeBeers Diamond Engagement Ring Advertisement,” (N W Ayer Advertising Agency Records, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, 1945).

⁴⁶⁷ Arthur M. Vincent, *Join Your Right Hands: Addresses and Worship Aids for Church Weddings* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), 15-16.

couple as soon as they ask me to marry them,” one minister told *Presbyterian Life* in 1965. “Even those who are only nominally connected with the church, or not at all, seem to want to be married with these words. Sometimes we get into great theological discussions, and they find out that they have more faith than they thought they had,” he continued.⁴⁶⁸ Again and again, Catholic and Protestant leaders stressed that weddings ought to be considered predominantly religious events. One Protestant writer complained that “the cinema usually depict[ed] a church wedding as an essentially fashionable occasion rather than a religious one.”⁴⁶⁹ Of course, for Protestants, the position that weddings were *religiously* important events that ought best to occur in a church setting was a long way from the position of the Protestant Reformers, who considered them best left to the dictates of state and local custom, as was discussed in chapter two.

Like LDS or Jewish brides and grooms, at times Protestant and Catholic Christians had outright objections to popular white wedding practices on religious grounds. Evangelical Protestants expressed concern about drinking alcohol at wedding receptions; in the 1952 book for ministers’ wives, *Queen Without A Crown*, one pastor described agonizing over whether to officiate a wedding in the home of a local liquor dealer. (He decided to do it in the end, in order to provide them with a proper Christian service.)⁴⁷⁰ Music, that battleground subject of American youth culture of the 1950s and 1960s, was also a major sticking point in Christian wedding ceremonies and would remain so for decades. There was interest in insuring the music played during wedding rituals was sufficiently sacred, and not popular in origin. While not many churches would go as far as the Boston Archdiocese did in 1953 in banning the *Lobengrin* wedding march outright as not “strictly religious,” many

⁴⁶⁸ Janet Harbison, “Weddings with Less Worry,” *Presbyterian Life*, June 1 1965, 13.

⁴⁶⁹ Trueblood, *The Common Ventures of Life*.

⁴⁷⁰ Loyd E. Williams, *Queen without a Crown: The Preacher's Wife* (San Antonio, Texas: The Naylor Company, 1952), 68-69.

churches were leery of secular music being incorporated as part of the church wedding.⁴⁷¹ Clergy sometimes felt that music played in the church ought to be music composed for liturgical purposes. Episcopalian clergyman Edward Dell explained in the 1964 *A Handbook for Church Weddings* why certain songs – “Moonlight and Roses,” popular hits from the musicals *The Sound of Music* and *Camelot*, as well as the famous bridal march – were not appropriate for church weddings. Music in a church wedding should be aimed at God, he explained, and “must center our minds on Him.” Music from the entertainment world was inappropriate, he argued, and he would not permit it in weddings he officiated.⁴⁷² (Perhaps one underlying worry was that if “Moonlight and Roses” made it in the door, then surely Chuck Berry, Elvis Presley or the Rolling Stones might not be far behind.) In these cases, certain cultural practices were seen as infringing too far into what was now considered to be the religious domain of the wedding day.

However, as a rule, Christian warnings about elaborate popular practices tended to be mild in tone and limited only to when they might interfere with religious meanings. For example, condemnations of commercial weddings on moral grounds as something vulgar or falsely showy were no longer commonly voiced. As one 1958 manual for pastors put it, when it came to flowers, dresses, photographers and music, “anything that adds to the reverence and devotional atmosphere is acceptable,” and only anything “that obscures or detracts from the spiritual nature of the service” was to be discouraged.⁴⁷³ But because advertisers and wedding entrepreneurs also claimed to be helping to create a sacred, moving

⁴⁷¹ Religion News Service, “Boston Archbishop Bans ‘Here Comes the Bride,’ *New York Times*, February 20 1953, 21.

⁴⁷² Edward Thomas Dell, *A Handbook for Church Weddings* (New York: Morehouse-Barlow Co., 1964), 49-51.

⁴⁷³ *The Pastor's Manual for Premarital Counseling*, 110.

atmosphere – albeit not necessarily one that emphasized specifically Christian meanings – this often meant that the interests of marketplace and church appeared to be aligned.

Moreover, there was also considerable Christian accommodation to and facilitation of commercial and popular wedding practices. One example seems to be the tendency of twentieth-century Protestant wedding liturgies to become longer and more formal in tone, with more ritual options for the bride and groom. In the mid-twentieth century, especially in the 1960s, most Christian denominations undertook changes to traditional liturgies, including rites of marriage. These liturgical changes cannot accurately be interpreted as direct responses to popular wedding practices; they happened in the midst of denominational-level interest in rethinking all liturgies, for multiple and complex reasons.⁴⁷⁴ However, the result of the reshaping of twentieth-century liturgies was for Protestant wedding liturgies to tend to look increasingly alike, and for the rites to resemble the one in the *Book of Common Prayer*. By the twentieth century, even most American Baptists – a denomination with a reputation for disliking formal liturgy – were more likely to use a liturgical book for marriage, and it was also one derived from the *Book of Common Prayer*. The formality and reverent tone of this liturgy had cross-denominational appeal and fit with twentieth-century sensibilities about marriage.

The wedding liturgy in the *Book of Common Prayer* itself underwent changes in this period, also reflecting the tendency towards length and elaboration. It was revised twice in the twentieth century, and in each revision the wedding liturgy became longer and included more options for brides and grooms. The first revision, from 1928 reflected only a few notable changes from the previous 1892 version (which itself was virtually identical to the version from 1789). First, the promise to “obey” from the bride’s vow was removed; as

⁴⁷⁴ Keith F. Pecklers, "Liturgical Movement," in *The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. Paul F. Bradshaw (London: SCM Press, 2002), 288-189.

discussed in previous chapters, this had become problematic for many liberal Protestants. Second, the 1928 marriage rite was slightly longer, taking up more pages – including optional blessings of the ring, for example.⁴⁷⁵ The second (and more controversial) twentieth-century revision of the *Book of Common Prayer* took place in 1979,⁴⁷⁶ and this revision was a reflection of an influential twentieth-century liturgical movement within American Christianity. Especially spurred by the reforms of the Catholic Church during the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s, many denominations called for “the revitalization of the church through the renewal of its worship,” or an increased interest in studying the origins of Christian practice and of applying critical academic methods to the consideration of liturgy.⁴⁷⁷ Revisers accordingly both updated the language of the *Book of Common Prayer* to make it more accessible and made use of scholarly liturgical studies to adjust its order and emphasis. This revision resulted in significant changes in the wedding form. For one, the 1979 rite deliberately updated the archaic language of the 1928 rite; for example, what was called the “Form of Solemnization of Matrimony” in 1928 became “The Celebration and Blessing of a Marriage” in 1979. Though the language is simpler, the form itself is more complex: the 1979 wedding is five pages longer than the 1928 version, including entirely new sections.

⁴⁷⁵Episcopal Church., *The Book of Common Prayer, and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church According to the Use of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America : Together with the Psalter of the Psalms of David* (New York: Oxford University Press American Branch, 1908), 277-81, Episcopal Church. and Episcopal Church. General Convention, *The Book of Common Prayer, and Administration of the Sacraments, and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church*

According to the Use of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America: Together with the Psalter, or Psalms of David (Philadelphia: By permission of the General Convention printed by W. Young and J. Ormrod, 1795), 190-92, Episcopal Church. and Daniel Berkeley Updike, *The Book of Common Prayer : And Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church According to the Use of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America : Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David* (Boston: Printed for the Commission, 1928), 300-05.

⁴⁷⁶In 1979, *Time* magazine published a poll reporting that only 23% of laity claimed to like the new version, compared to 80% of clergy. “Battle of the Prayer Books,” *Time*, no. 7 (1979), <http://www.time.com/time/>.

⁴⁷⁷Keith F. Pecklers, “Liturgical Movement,” in *The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, ed. Paul F. Bradshaw (London: SCM Press, 2002), 488-89.

Additions include a section devoted to the “The Ministry of the Word,” the option of taking communion, a list of appropriate scriptural passages for readings, places for the officiant to address the bride and groom by name, the passing of the peace, and so forth. There were some notable deletions, too. One was the officiant’s charge that the bride and groom admit any impediment to being married or else answer for it “at the dreadful day of judgment.”⁴⁷⁸ This seemed too grim a command, perhaps, for the magical and romantic sensibilities of the twentieth-century wedding day.

Some changes to the wedding liturgy, if not direct adaptations to commercial elaborations, were at least helpful in facilitating larger and more elaborate weddings. For example, the 1928 liturgy assumes the ceremony will involve only one ring given by the groom to the bride; the 1979 liturgy provides an option for a double ring ceremony. The 1928 liturgy specifies that the persons to be married are to go “into the body of the Church, or shall be ready in some proper house”; the 1979 version eliminates the direct reference to a wedding at home, instead specifying “the church or some other appropriate place.” The 1979 version further notes that during the entrance of the bride and attendants, “a hymn, psalm, or anthem may be sung, or instrumental music may be played,” which is not mentioned in the older version at all.⁴⁷⁹ All of this reflected and supported the assumption that church weddings involved a certain degree of formality and expense.⁴⁸⁰

⁴⁷⁸Episcopal Church. and Updike, *The Book of Common Prayer : And Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church According to the Use of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America : Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David*, 300.

⁴⁷⁹Episcopal Church., *The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church : Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David According to the Use of the Episcopal Church* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 427,23, Episcopal Church. and Updike, *The Book of Common Prayer : And Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church According to the Use of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America : Together with the Psalter or Psalms of David*, 302, 00.

⁴⁸⁰ Liturgical changes along similar lines seem to have occurred within other Protestant denominations as well. One intriguing parallel is that just as a commercial wedding industry promoted “tradition” as a source of legitimacy for wedding consumption, Christian denominations influenced by

These types of liturgical changes suggest some formal, indirect church reactions to shifting wedding practices and attitudes towards marriage. But books of advice by pastors and their wives provide more pragmatic, ground-level insight into how individual religious communities resisted or adapted commercial innovations. Although male church leadership did not frequently discuss white wedding practices, these practices did find their way into the day-to-day responsibilities of women in church communities. In many communities, the custom was for the minister's wife to receive the minister's fees for a wedding. Methodist minister Arthur Wentworth Hewitt, in a 1943 book of "pastoral theology for the minister's wives," approved of keeping the wedding fees "sacred" for wives, and argued that husbands should not ask for them "under any circumstances."⁴⁸¹ Ministers' wives were due this money (which in 1943 could be as little as five dollars and as much as several hundred) because they apparently had a set of informal responsibilities associated with weddings. In a number of books and articles on the topic, the minister's wife was encouraged to take special steps to make even the most humble, informal ceremonies full of beauty and magic. In one 1950 handbook for ministers' wives, Welthy Honsinger Fisher, a minister's wife herself, proclaimed that the wedding day "must" be surrounded with beauty and suggested ways that the minister's wife could improve upon the theatricality of the day. "Why not make up your mind to become an expert on all the details of weddings?" she asked her readers. "It will be fun and it will be enormously helpful, especially for the church weddings." Fisher claimed that the minister's wife could be most helpful in improvising the details of smaller weddings, especially those that took place in the parsonage. She suggested constructing your own altar

liturgical studies were reworking wedding rites on the basis of church tradition and forgotten origins. Both market and church drew upon the power of the appeal of continuity with the past to legitimate changes in the twentieth-century wedding.

⁴⁸¹ Arthur Wentworth Hewitt, *The Shepherdess* (Chicago, New York: Willett, Clark & company, 1943), 189.

to bring out at a moment's notice, and keeping a set of wedding-related decorations in a special box. Learn to play the *Lobengrin* wedding march on the piano or organ, she suggested, or have a record handy to play. Fisher also recommended that wives whip up a quick cake, "make your best brand of coffee," and surprise small wedding parties with a pleasant reception. "Never," advised Fisher, "let a wedding be casual. Make each one a dream come true."⁴⁸² There was performativity involved in this fairy godmother-style granting of dreams, and the stage management was usually framed as a feminine task.

Some clergy resented that despite the trouble elaborate weddings could be, wedding fees for ministers or their wives stayed notably small. In a chapter for wives titled "Patience in the Parsonage," Hewitt related that in one city church, both minister and his wife were required to wear evening attire (which they did, despite the expense) and were then given a rather small wedding fee "with all condescension."⁴⁸³ In another of Hewitt's anecdotes, a wedding party took over the parsonage for hours, taking charge of the house "as if they owned it," until at last "the wedding was over and the fee was – under."⁴⁸⁴ Hewitt related these stories with exasperation, but also carefully argued that the minister's wife had wedding-related responsibilities that needed to be met regardless.

The minister and his wife were not supposed to complain too much about wedding fee in part because the project of making each wedding special and a dream come true was supposed to come from the heart: it was a moral responsibility. One 1923 short story demonstrated this moral clearly. A charming (but somewhat frivolous) assistant pastor's wife complained to her husband that the pastor, his boss, took all the weddings for himself, and left her spouse with the less-lucrative funerals. When her husband finally was given a

⁴⁸² Welthy Honsinger Fisher, "Handbook for Ministers' Wives," (New York: Woman's Press, 1950), 53-54.

⁴⁸³ Hewitt, *The Shepherdess*, 165-66.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 165.

wedding to perform, the bride and groom were poorly-dressed strangers, not the affluent couple that she had hoped would pay them well. Nevertheless, the minister's wife felt sorry for them as newcomers to the town and threw them a little reception in the parsonage. The story ended when she and her husband were rewarded unexpectedly with five hundred dollars from the delighted groom – who, surprise, had just returned from striking gold in the Klondike.⁴⁸⁵ In this story, the virtue of the minister's wife in wedding planning was amply and materially rewarded.

As was consistently true in the history of white weddings, gender mattered in determining whether a practice was considered consistent with religiosity on the wedding day. By 1979, at least one male minister in *Christian Century* would admit that “my most basic objection to many of the weddings I get caught in is not that they are theologically unsound but that are, to use a good old southern expression, *tacky*.” The author, who related several tales of being embarrassed during weddings, suspected that much of the emphasis on the religious – “the liturgy, the premarital counseling, and the minister's earnest appeal for ‘seriousness’ and ‘dignity’” – might be a way for ministers to cope with being “up to their necks in the most carnal of incarnations.” Here the minister was surrounded by ugly tuxedos and family tension and readings of poetry by Kahlil Gibran and moonlight serenades. This goopy sentimentality and reminder of erotic love were simply “embarrassing” for well-educated, theologically-sophisticated clergymen. The author of this piece urged ministers to get past this embarrassment.⁴⁸⁶ But in the context of the history of female-dominated popular practices, this observation is potentially revealing. Christian clergy may have used the excuse of stressing institutional religious meanings in weddings to avoid association with the commercial, sentimental and *feminine* practices associated with the white wedding. While

⁴⁸⁵ W. Werner, "Church Mice," *Boston Daily Globe*, August 7 1923, 18.

⁴⁸⁶ William H. Willimon, "'Cleaning up' the Wedding," *Christian Century*, June 6-13 1979, 654.

many were content to leave these embarrassing practices to their wives and other female leaders, others complained that female-dominated popular wedding practices tended to undermine pastoral authority. For example, when one Protestant author complained about the depiction of weddings in film, he pointed out that in Hollywood weddings the minister was “plainly secondary,” and acted more as “a functionary rather than one who is leading a genuine act of worship.”⁴⁸⁷ When clergy complained that lavish weddings were not sufficiently focused on religion, one subtext may have been that they were too focused on women.

While books written by ministers’ wives always affirmed that the wedding should be of deep religious significance, they also were far more likely to attend to the fuss and feathers associated with big weddings. A 1966 book, *Your Christian Wedding* by a Baptist pastor’s wife Elizabeth Swadley, started off with a reminder to brides that “whether your wedding is large or small, elegant or simple, public or private – it can only be Christian if the hearts and lives of the people involved have been transformed by the presence of Christ himself.” On religious grounds Swadley disapproved of alcohol at receptions, of soloists singing “Ave Maria” at Protestant weddings, and of weddings that veered towards either extreme of “extravagant” or “miserly.” Yet her book focused most of its attention on the planning and etiquette associated with large, formal weddings, blurring Christian and commercial practice. She suggested to brides that if the bridegroom had “a strange phobia of church weddings with all their pomp and trimmings,” don’t “pay any attention to him,” as he would probably be pleased in the end. No memory, Swadley claimed, was more beautiful in the mind of a woman than her wedding – “and the more sacred, the more worshipful it is, the more beautiful the memory.” Swadley emphasized the wedding as the bride’s day to express her

⁴⁸⁷ Trueblood, *The Common Ventures of Life*.

personality. In contrast to other stances on secular music, Swadley noted that she has seen the “lovely prayer song” “One Hand, One Heart” from the musical *West Side Story* performed at several weddings, and predicted that its origins in commercial entertainment would be lost, and it would be thought of as “purely wedding-ish!” After all, she maintained, if you can get the minister to agree to a musical selection, “the choice is yours.”⁴⁸⁸ Although she emphasized consistently that weddings were Christian rituals, what is striking about Swadley’s advice is that she does not seem to see much difference between what is “Christian” and what is “wedding-ish,” or what the bride’s choice dictates. Swadley cautioned against using wedding planners, as “[t]oo much emphasis on the theatrical aspects of the wedding tends invariably to detract from the more important spiritual aspect.” But she also reminded brides to consider the “atmosphere” of the wedding, choosing music that would establish the event’s “personality,” and she devoted chapters to working with florists, photographers and attendants for maximum effect. The end result was the bride’s “shining moment,” when “all eyes focus upon you as you walk towards the altar.”⁴⁸⁹ For Swadley, a wedding may well have been a Christian rite, but it was also the bride’s moment of pageantry and pomp – and there was no reason why a wedding could not express both these functions at once.

Swadley’s advice represented what was probably the most common attitude towards white weddings among women in Christian communities: the wedding should indeed be a religious ritual, with specific Christian meanings, but it also had a different kind of sacred valence. It was the bride’s moment to shine, her chance to be transformed into someone beautiful, to express her own essence in a grand and overpowering way, and to receive the

⁴⁸⁹ Elizabeth Swadley, *Your Christian Wedding* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1966), 3,10,11, 64, 44,59, 110.

attention of all. As was the case for so many other female commentators in this era and before, Swadley was full of ambivalent messages about the white wedding. She loved the theatricality and atmosphere of music and flowers done well, but also sometimes referenced these elements as a competition to the event's religious significance. She wanted to affirm that a church wedding should be about love and Christian marriage, but she also acknowledged the wedding was usually more significant to the bride, and the groom should be pressed into it if he was reluctant. She knew that a wedding could be sacred outside of a church, but she also lovingly spoke to the sentimental appeal of having a formal wedding in the bride's church. Yet while there could be tension in these competing wedding day values, they were not ultimately incompatible. A wedding could and should be a day for the bride's intense experience of transformation *and* a day for Christian marriage.

In 1927, in a discussion of the miracle at the marriage at Cana, Helen Philbrook Patten argued in *Methodist Review* that a wedding was the perfect setting for Jesus to perform the miracle in Christian scripture. There were many reasons why – including that a wedding involved “the miracle of love” – but one reason was that Mary, the mother of Jesus, was present at the marriage at Cana. The “divine mother, the immaculate bride” was present at every marriage, Patten said, in the “unseen virgin concealed in every bride, who, however dimly or fleetingly, never fails to glimpse the glory that surrounds her.”⁴⁹⁰ Mary was always at a wedding, Patten argued, because the bride always represented her. These kinds of references to the virginity and bridal character of Mary, even from Protestant voices, were the closest anyone got to giving the experience of transformative bridal beauty an explicitly Christian mythic grounding. Hollywood filmmakers and advertisers did a much better job of linking the transformation of the bride to the Cinderella myth. Indeed, even Roman Catholic

⁴⁹⁰ Helen Philbrook Patten, "The Marriage at Cana," *The Methodist Review*, July 1927, 6.

brides of the late twentieth-century were probably more likely to reference the Disney heroine than the Virgin Mary in planning the wedding day. Yet in practice the Cinderella wedding and Christian marriage were intertwined; they each depended on the added sacred value of the other. While clergy and religious leaders might have sought to distinguish the Christian ceremony from the transformative white wedding, their emphasis on church weddings inadvertently helped to link the two even more closely.

Making an individual of myself: changing currents

Through the middle of the twentieth century, it became more and more common to refer to the wedding day as an expression of the personality of the bride or of the bride and groom as a couple. Rather than reenact the form of the sentimental white wedding, brides and grooms became more interested in reinventing it in line with their own interests, family backgrounds or ethnic traditions. In the early 1960s, a series of half-amused, half-horrified letters to Dear Abby related anecdotes about weddings that had taken place on horseback or in scuba gear underwater. Abigail Van Buren tartly referred to an underwater wedding as “a new version of water on the brain.”⁴⁹¹ But by the late twentieth century, it was imperative that the bride and groom “be themselves” on their wedding day. If that meant getting married in a rodeo, on a tractor or barefoot on the beach, so be it.

If the end of the 1960s saw the end of the high point of the sentimental white wedding, it certainly did not see the end of the white wedding itself. What would follow was the rise of a postsentimental attitude towards weddings, or weddings that sought to sidestep the excesses of the sentimental form, stressing individualism and expression of ethnic identity. While the white wedding form would survive for decades, it was no longer usually

⁴⁹¹ Abigail Van Buren, "Clothes Horse Went to Wedding," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct 1 1962, A6.

enough to replicate it without expressing something unique about the bride and grooms and their families. But this was a change in the content of what was sacred about the day and certainly not a marked shift in the importance of the ritual.

The 1950s and 1960s saw some struggle over how to conceptualize the new emphasis on individualism on the wedding day. For instance, in the 1960 young adult novel *The Best Wedding Dress*, Sara, a New York City teenager who has just graduated high school, decided to marry her “beat-generation boy friend.” Sara was preoccupied with wanting an unique, bohemian wedding, with a sophisticated, nontraditional wedding dress. Her main interest, she said, was avoiding a life that might one day involve “[c]ountry clubs, a lot of stuffy overstuffed furniture, a ranch house in Westchester ... meeting the five-twenty train every night to spend the evening with a husband whose mind is totally occupied with selling women a lot of smelly soap they don’t need.” Because of her strong opinions on the subject, Sara faced plenty of conflict with her fiancé and family on the subject of her wedding and marriage. By the end, she decided her focus on being “different” from most women was dwelling on superficial and external trappings rather than her true character. In rejecting things like a traditional white wedding dress, she was “was acting like a crackpot.” She was doing “[a]nything to be different, when I really should have been trying to make an individual of myself.”⁴⁹² In this book, the sentimental white wedding came under attack for representing conformity and consumerism but ultimately was protected as being simply expressive of externals, not a statement about real character. However, by the 1970s, many were rejecting the sentimental white wedding on the grounds that it was an artificial ritual imposed by others on to the bride and groom.

⁴⁹² Hila Colman, *The Best Wedding Dress* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1960), 159, 219.

The Cinderella dream of transformation and magic on the wedding day emerged out of a Victorian notion of true womanhood and was bolstered by a sense of the wedding as formal performance that spread in the late nineteenth century. It was never a universal experience, but in the middle of the twentieth century, it became a widespread ideal. Even in an era of postsentimental attitudes towards inherited rituals, this understanding of the wedding day would persist for decades.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Conclusion: The persistence of glass slippers and other mysteries about American white weddings

It's a nice day to start again. It's a nice day for a white wedding.

– Billy Idol, lyrics to “White Wedding,” 1982

From its origins in the mid-nineteenth century to its high point of sentimental celebration approximately a century later, the American white wedding underwent a process of sacralization, becoming an ever-more elaborate set of practices associated with numinous meanings nested within and distinct from institutional Christianity. By the twentieth century, advertisers could draw upon an extant set of sacred associations to encourage and invent new commercial practices, and churches tended to facilitate the process because of their own interests in promoting marriage and religious participation. Yet by the end of this period, the beginning of the 1970s, the style of celebration described in the study above – the sentimental white wedding – no longer seemed to be the dominant ritual form.

During the 1970s, when authenticity and rebellion against tradition was the mood *du jour* for college-educated women and men, fashionable weddings in the media were presented as more casual, authentic affairs that drew upon tradition only when it felt right to the bride and groom. Indeed, some predicted that the elaborate white wedding was on the verge of vanishing forever.⁴⁹³ Formal, expensive weddings and ornate Cinderella dresses, some argued, were becoming a little-missed casualty of the women's movement and of an increased emphasis on individual expression and ethnic identity. If women were now increasingly feeling free to seek personal and financial fulfillment through career and to view marriage as optional, the power of the Cinderella myth could seem to be unraveling.

⁴⁹³ Cele Otnes and Elizabeth Hafkin Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams : The Allure of the Lavish Wedding, Life Passages 2* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 49.

Yet, on the contrary, the lavish wedding underwent a huge boost in popularity in the early 1980s, a trend partially due to the influence of the elaborate wedding of Diana Spencer and Prince Charles, which was televised to an international audience of more than 700 million in 1981. The Archbishop of Canterbury echoed the verdict of many when he referred to this royal wedding directly as “the stuff of which fairy tales are made.”⁴⁹⁴ Spencer’s white taffeta wedding gown, adorned with more than 10,000 sequins and pearls, was much admired and much copied by international spectators, just as Queen Victoria’s had been roughly 140 years before.⁴⁹⁵ And in the 1980s, brides and grooms tended to plan marriages that, while rarely as lavish as the royal wedding, were unapologetically large and expensive by most people’s standards. As big weddings became fashionable again, wedding-related business boomed. For instance, fewer than fifty American wedding-gown manufacturers existed in 1986, but four times that many existed a decade later.⁴⁹⁶ By the 1990s, weddings had never been bigger or more costly, and by the twenty-first century, weddings represented the \$70 billion industry described in the introduction.⁴⁹⁷

Since the 1980s, then, the white wedding proved to be alive and well – and more associated with sacred experiences than ever, which helped to justify its steeply rising costs. In comparison to couples of the past, the brides and grooms of postsentimental wedding ceremonies were much more likely to feel free to pick and choose what traditions they found meaningful and to view the wedding as a way to express or experience something unique about themselves, their relationship or their ethnicity. Although the parents of the bride were

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid. Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams : The Allure of the Lavish Wedding*, “The Stuff of Fairy Tales,” *The Daily Telegraph*, 11 Feb 2005.

⁴⁹⁵ Katherine Jellison, *It's Our Day: America's Love Affair with the White Wedding, 1945-2005*, ed. Karal Ann Marling and Erika Doss, *Cultureamerica* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2008).

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁷ Vicki Howard, *Brides Inc. American Weddings and the Business of Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 1.

still active in planning and paying for many weddings, couples of the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries were also more likely to pay for weddings themselves, especially when they married at later ages. But they were no less likely to speak of the wedding as a set-apart, magical day: a day that could connect them with ancestors and descendents and serve as a culmination of powerful romantic love.

By the late twentieth century the type of sacred experience most tightly woven into the lavish white wedding was Cinderella transformation, something closely related to the sacred power of romantic love and tradition but also distinct from these themes. One bride told sociologist Sharon Boden in 2000 what she thought was essential for a wedding to be romantic:

The dress has to be something that stepped out of a Cinderella scrapbook. It's got to be something with beautiful detail, a big flowing train and everything like that and cute little bridesmaids. That to me is romanticism. And also the very elegant surroundings. The horse-drawn carriage, I mean Rolls Royces to me don't have the romanticism of a horse-drawn carriage. I mean, they can't possibly can they? And again it's like Cinderella arrived in a coach and she had this beautiful dress on and everything and the orchestra started playing and the heavens open up, you know, it's all those sort of things to me.⁴⁹⁸

The researcher's question specifically concerned romance, but the bride's description was centered on the mood created by her dress, her vehicle and the intense moment of her arrival when the "orchestra started playing and the heavens open up."⁴⁹⁹ While this bride elsewhere expressed love and excitement about the person she was marrying, her notion of "romance" on the wedding day did not foreground him or their relationship directly. She was focused on imagining the ecstatic, transformative experience of being identified with Cinderella arriving at the ball. In the case of this bride and for many others, this intense,

⁴⁹⁸ Sharon Boden, *Consumerism, Romance, and the Wedding Experience* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire ; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

⁴⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 120.

publicly performed identification with ideal femininity is best described as a type of sacred experience.

The Cinderella wedding experience has never been more marketable. In the early 2010s, brides and grooms who wanted the magical association with Cinderella on their wedding days might encounter considerable advertising for products or services that could provide a fairy-tale princess atmosphere. If they wanted the story of Cinderella directly invoked, they could shop online to purchase Cinderella-themed cake toppers, invitations or glass slippers. And to really “create the enchanting environment [their] heart desire[d],” a couple could choose to be married in Walt Disney World in a ceremony that drew upon direct links with the Disney film.⁵⁰⁰ For a starting price of \$28,000 in 2010, a bride and groom might exchange vows in the Magic Kingdom with Cinderella’s Castle as the backdrop in a ceremony that included a fanfare trumpeter, string quartet, and horse-drawn carriage.⁵⁰¹ For an additional fee, they might have a Renaissance-costumed major domo carry the rings down the aisle in a glass slipper, costumed Disney Princess characters to greet guests, or a Cinderella-inspired couture wedding dress.⁵⁰² Such literal devotion to the magic of Cinderella is expensive and relatively rare (roughly 2,000 weddings a year took place in Walt Disney World as of 2003), but the association of fairy tales and wedding days remains common indeed.⁵⁰³ As historians of weddings Otnes and Pleck put it, in the late twentieth century the

⁵⁰⁰ *Disney Fairy Tale Weddings, Wishes Collection* (Disney.com Parks, 2010 [cited 1 February 2010]); available from <http://disneyweddings.disney.go.com/weddings/florida/wishes/detail>.

⁵⁰¹ *Disney Fairy Tale Weddings, Wishes Ceremony Location, Magic Kingdom* (Disney.com Parks, 2010 [cited 1 Feb 2010]); available from <http://disneyweddings.disney.go.com/weddings/florida/wishes/ceremony/magical/magic-kingdom/detail>.

⁵⁰² *Disney Fairy Tale Weddings, Wishes Reception, Entertainment* (Disney.com Parks, 2010 [cited 1 Feb 2010]); available from <http://disneyweddings.disney.go.com/weddings/florida/wishes/entertainment/detail>. *Kirstie Kelly for Disney's Fairy Tale Weddings* (Disneybridal.com, 2010 [cited 1 Feb 2010]); available from <http://www.disneybridal.com/index.html>.

⁵⁰³ Laura M. Holson, "For \$38,000, Get the Cake, and Mickey, Too," *New York Times*, May 24 2003.

belief and expectation that every bride could be Cinderella became “a girlhood fantasy, a democratic right, and the central preoccupation of the wedding.”⁵⁰⁴

Why does the appeal of Cinderella dresses and fairy-tale weddings linger, even in an age when a woman presumably does not need to depend so exclusively on a “prince” for upward mobility and fulfillment? Katherine Jellison, in her history of late twentieth-century weddings, points out that by the 1990s, “the Cinderella fantasy had transformed into one that simultaneously accommodated both a job and a handsome prince.”⁵⁰⁵ While the 1950 film’s attitude towards gender roles and relationships might appear dated, Disney’s Cinderella story would seem to have lost no power as a story of marketplace magic. As argued above, it is crucial that the Disney myth does not precisely hinge upon the heroine being saved by a prince; it hinges upon her being saved by a dress, a vehicle, and the perfect accessories. Because women continue to be drawn to the imagery of the Fairy Godmother’s transforming wand and the wonderful power of the marketplace to refine them into the woman who turns all heads, the wedding day continues to offer an opportunity for women to enact a moment of superhuman perfection in front of family, friends and future spouse. Just as twenty-first century television makeover shows routinely offer those who are unfashionable and repentant the chance to be saved by professional consultants, the contemporary wedding day offers ordinary women the chance to become someone identifiably extraordinary: someone more feminine and more beautiful than themselves.

The theme of transformation through the marketplace has played a special role in women’s cultural and economic history since the mid-nineteenth century. Considerable historical evidence has suggested that practices of consumption have been crucial to the

⁵⁰⁴ Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams : The Allure of the Lavish Wedding*, 54.

⁵⁰⁵ Jellison, *It's Our Day: America's Love Affair with the White Wedding, 1945-2005*.

economic, emotional and political lives of women of many backgrounds.⁵⁰⁶ The story of the white wedding is, in some large part, a story about the way women achieved agency in the context of an emerging modern industrial market system. This agency unfolded first in the power rhetorically given to nineteenth century middle-class women to serve, within the domestic sphere, as moral leaders, family guardians and priestesses of the home. This power, though always constrained, animated the symbolism of the first wave of white weddings with an emphasis on family, feminine selflessness and purity. By the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, women were increasingly achieving agency as consumers, which played into the ever-more elaborate symbolism of the weddings of that period. With the development of a full-blown consumer capitalism by the mid-twentieth century, the successful achievement of female identity was linked tightly to the ability to consume well, and this assumption was not seriously challenged by changing late-twentieth century gender norms. The white wedding served and serves as a powerful ritualization of women's consumer agency, a conscious and unconscious recognition of transformative power that continues to be especially intense and meaningful for many Western women. Like other sorts of modern institutions and inventions, it appeals to tradition, even when that tradition is illusory. Like other formal and symbolic representations of marketplace relationships, it turns to a self-conscious theatricality to convey a sense of ever-shifting and negotiable

⁵⁰⁶ For example: Kathy Lee Peiss, *Hope in a Jar : The Making of America's Beauty Culture*, 1st ed. (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1998); Alison J. Clarke, *Tupperware : The Promise of Plastic in 1950s America* (Washington D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1999); Nan Enstad, *Ladies of Labor, Girls of Adventure : Working Women, Popular Culture, and Labor Politics at the Turn of the Twentieth Century, Popular Cultures, Everyday Lives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Margaret R. Andrews and Mary M. Talbot, *All the World and Her Husband : Women in Twentieth-Century Consumer Culture* (London ; New York: Cassell, 2000).

individual identities.⁵⁰⁷ Like other popular expressions of the sacred, it can have different shades of meaning for practitioners in different contexts.

The emphasis on the bride as a consumer might seem strange on the wedding day, which is, after all, supposed to demarcate the beginning of a marriage, a relationship between both bride and groom. That white weddings have relied on both the role of consumption and the symbolic power of romantic love was not coincidence, as consumer culture and romantic love have deeply intertwined roots in Western modernity. Marriage based on romantic love, as has been argued above, was a new but highly prioritized ideal of the nineteenth-century Anglo-American middle class, displacing older notions of marriage arranged by families for economic or strategic purposes. Just as the modern marketplace transformed individuals into choosing consumers, the love match transformed courtship into an open marketplace of personal preferences and attachments. Anyone, according to this view, could experience the happiness of love based on whom they could attract and/or woo due to their own personal set of virtues. But the process of choosing or being chosen as a mate was cloaked in a great deal of mystification; it must never appear to be reduced to what was practical or strategic, yet it could not be completely impractical and blinded to reality either. In discourse about romantic love, nineteenth-century love was sometimes fancifully spoken of as an external, otherworldly force that acted upon individuals who had no true agency in the matter. In the twentieth century, love continued to be spoken of as something passionate and overwhelming. Yet twentieth-century discourse about marriage, as has been argued above, also emphasized prudence and caution in choosing a spouse and in deciding to marry. Romantic choice is mysterious – still a subject about which Americans

⁵⁰⁷ For more on this, see Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart : The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750* (Cambridge Cambridgehire ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

feel very strongly but that holds many implicit contradictions and injustices. The wedding is a celebration that ritualizes this opaque process of free-market marriage selection. Although both men and women are expected to take part in this process of romantic choice, on the wedding day, the bride – with her special costume, the emphasis on her beauty, the act of being “given away” – is the most visible symbolic expression of what the “commodity” is in this transaction. On the wedding day she is thus identified with both the act of consumption and what is being consumed.⁵⁰⁸

In addition, romantic love and consumer culture both are areas of modern life that seem to encourage fantasy, longing and appeals to the irrational; in other words, they can be fertile ground for new forms of the sacred. Colin Campbell, in a complex and irony-rich story that serves as parallel and corrective to Max Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, argues that the habits of consumption that characterize the modern world ought to be more of a puzzle to us. Why do contemporary people, he asked, have an “unlimited hunger” for buying things, and what explains the “constant death of wants” that results in landfills full of rejected consumer goods that no longer bring us pleasure? We long for goods that, once purchased, always and inevitably disappoint us – and the longing itself seems to be, at heart, the most satisfying experience. Campbell argues that modern autonomous imaginative hedonism, or the imagination of the emotional pleasures that goods might bring, was formed through the habits of nineteenth-century Romanticism – which itself depended on the subjectivism of a Protestantism that required individuals to search inward for signs of salvation. Romanticism, which stressed “a restless anxiety in the face of life, a preference for the strange and curious, a penchant for reverie and dreaming, a leaning to mysticism, and a celebration of the irrational,” legitimated the search for pleasure as an end to itself and

⁵⁰⁸ For more on the contradictory contemporary cultural “talk” about romantic love, see Ann Swidler, *Talk of Love : How Culture Matters* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

provided the imaginative and internally-oriented disposition that could lead to modern consumerism. Campbell suggests in passing that romantic love, like consumption, can be viewed in these terms – as an experience that relies heavily on the imagination of pleasure and thus presumably will lead to disappointment.⁵⁰⁹

Cultural sociologist Sharon Boden specifically was interested in the extent to which the Romantic ethic Campbell described affected wedding consumption among contemporary brides and grooms. Of all kinds of consumption, she argued, surely consumption for the wedding day – an occasion overlaid with connotations both romantic and Romantic – would show evidence of Campbell’s theory. In interviews with recently-married couples in Great Britain on the subject of planning and experiencing their wedding days, she found that intricate daydreams and fantasies of the perfect day had played a significant part in the construction of the wedding, especially for women. She was less confident than Campbell about the inevitability of “disappointment,” which she stressed was only one possible outcome of consumption. Many of the couples she interviewed were not disappointed in their wedding day at all; many experienced the “let-down” afterwards as something natural and not unanticipated. They also seemed to enjoy the retelling of their wedding stories. In her account women viewed their weddings as a chance to bring their fantasies to realization and to have a profound emotional and irrational experience that could be relived through practices of memory. For the women in Boden’s interviews, the associations with romantic love fed into and heightened the experience, although the “unsurpassable peak” they craved was truly one of a performance of beauty and perfection

⁵⁰⁹ Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 37, 38, 181, 203.

brought about by consumption.⁵¹⁰ The mood and motivations of romantic love, something so long identified with the irrational and the mysterious, was easily folded into pursuit of other kinds of sacred experiences.

Yet this dissertation has not focused exclusively on sacred meaning outside of institutional settings but has also sought to explore Christian – and especially Protestant – attitudes towards the wedding as popularly practiced. Does the twenty-first century emphasis on the bride, her wardrobe and her Disney-tinged fantasies effectively crowd out any institutional religious significance associated with the day? Perhaps the white wedding ritual is now largely empty of institutional religious meaning; perhaps it is now most importantly a sacred ritual of romance, appeal to tradition and feminine perfection. Some vestigial trappings of Christianity may linger, but despite the best efforts of twentieth-century clergy to inject spiritual importance into the day, religious substance is just not the point. As evidence of the superficial involvement of Christianity, one might point to the popularity of the “Christian-style wedding” in Japan in recent decades. Although approximately one percent of Japanese women and men claim to be Christian, approximately three fourths of couples marry in what is usually marketed as a “Christian ceremony.” The Christian ceremony (viewed as an alternative to the Shinto ceremony) is essentially a Western white wedding, involving a voluminous white dress, a church, and a marriage based on love and romance. One important ingredient seems to be a visibly Western man serving an officiant – not necessarily ordained, but costumed and behaving as clergy; many large hotels apparently hire foreign actors to keep on staff. For most Japanese women and men seeking to be married in a “Christian-style” wedding, the appeal can hardly be said to be the ceremony’s

⁵¹⁰ Boden, *Consumerism, Romance, and the Wedding Experience*, 153. Max Weber, "Religious Rejections of the World and Their Directions," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H.H. and C. Wright Mills Gerth (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 347.

theology or the couple's relationship to church participation.⁵¹¹ The appeal seems more likely to be the same experience of romance and perfection associated with the Western white wedding. Some might wonder if this attitude is terribly different from that of many contemporary American couples.

Indeed, even as nineteenth and twentieth century American Christians increasingly encouraged church weddings for their own purposes, there was often an uneasy awareness that other meanings associated with the church wedding could be in competition with Christian meanings – and that the Christian meanings might not be winning the day. As chapter six argued, this was especially true in the middle of the twentieth century, when clergy and lay leaders repeated the mantra that the wedding should be a religious – and not social – ceremony. Brides who were preoccupied with how they looked, with the flowers and music and order of procession, were not able to focus their attention on the wedding as the time when “the stamp of approval of the Christian community is made.”⁵¹² In part these worries were situated in an overall Christian concern about the authority of church and clergy in society at large; if the marketplace had somehow inserted the lavish wedding into the walls of churches, what did that imply about the power of churches to guide the life course of their congregants? If those planning weddings seemed more concerned with the flowers than with premarital counseling, whose institutional authority was calling the shots? In addition, as has been the case with many critiques of the foolishness and extravagance of consumer culture, clergy concerns about the commercialization of the wedding were also, importantly, gendered – based in a suspicion of women's agency, which could seem to be displacing the authority of clergy. As chapter six suggested, critiques of “commercial”

⁵¹¹ James Brooke, "Here Comes the Japanese Bride, Looking Very Western," *New York Times*, July 8 2005.

⁵¹² Elton Trueblood, *The Common Ventures of Life* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1949), 47.

weddings also might have been complaints about the marginalization of men in favor of practices advocated by female experts. (This gender divide in white wedding expertise is illustrated especially in the difference in attitude between twentieth-century wedding manuals written by men and those written by clergy's wives.) Women were always associated with the marketplace and with consumption, and when clergy complained about wedding parties obsessed with fashion, etiquette and insignificant details, these complaints were not aimed at bridegrooms.

Yet the question remains – were weddings becoming drained of Christian significance as they were filled up with Cinderella dreams? If not secularized in the sense that they have been disenchanted or stripped of sacred meaning, have they not been secularized from the perspective of institutional Christianity? On the basis of the work of this dissertation, the answer seems to be that any narrative of religious decline on the wedding day requires some skepticism. Such a narrative of secularization would depend upon the existence of some period in American history that *was* marked by the consensus that wedding days were primarily religious -- which for Protestants, was never quite the case. Indeed, as has been argued above in chapters two, four and six, the argument that the wedding did have special religious significance was actually created and/or heightened by nineteenth- and twentieth-century anxieties over divorce, family and marriage. Indeed, the notion that the family and romantic love had such extraordinary religious significance truly took root in the mid-nineteenth century in the first place. In a very important sense, when twentieth-century Protestant clergy were insisting that brides and grooms experience their church weddings as predominantly spiritual occasions, they were making an argument that was fairly new and rather modern in its assumptions. Even within denominations that had always attributed the wedding with relatively more religious significance, the instability of

nineteenth- and twentieth-century marriages tended to generate more concern, and not less, about the meaning and implications of the wedding rite. In general, marriage, and, as a result, weddings, became more prominently valued in American religious communities.⁵¹³ It is difficult to interpret this as a straightforward story of religious decline.

Moreover, the above study has attempted to present the case that other kinds of sacred experience – the feeling of Cinderella transformation, the power of tradition, the sway of romantic love – have coexisted with and drawn upon Christian symbols and meanings. In fact, these forms of the sacred frequently called upon the associations of institutional religion in order to be effective. For example, formal church settings and liturgical language have seemed to potentially heighten the emotional experience -- both in the eyes of advertisers and according to brides themselves. As a general rule, the liturgies of church weddings became more elaborate, more responsive to the choices of brides and grooms, and longer in length – because the language of liturgies like the 1928 *Book of Common Prayer* seemed important and right during a white wedding. As we have seen, the image of the bride herself was indirectly linked to the Virgin Mary, to saints and to angels, both in discourse about the wedding by women and in wedding-related advertising. As noted in the introduction, most American weddings continue to take place in religious spaces such as churches, are officiated by clergy, and/or use ritual forms that are at least derived from, if not explicitly rooted in, religious understandings of marriage.⁵¹⁴ In the media, weddings frequently are depicted as Christian, occur in a church, involve vows recognizable from liturgies, and use the word “God.”⁵¹⁵

⁵¹³ This is, of course, why the contemporary controversy over the legality of same-sex marriage is frequently framed as a debate between pious Christians and secular liberals.

⁵¹⁵ Erika Engstrom and Beth Semic, "Portrayal of Religion in Reality Tv Programming: Hegemony and the Contemporary American Wedding," *Journal of Media and Religion* 2, no. 3 (2003),

We might interpret the role of Christianity in these examples as primarily superficial. Perhaps these Christian associations are simply part of the white wedding's appeal to tradition and history. Or perhaps because *something* of sacred importance is occurring, these associations with Christianity serve as an empty signifier, a kind of shorthand symbolism for what is reverent and transcendent. But in a country in which so many (and particularly women) identify as Christian and in which so many claim to attend church, we ought to wonder whether the involvement of institutional religion in the white wedding can be dismissed so easily. Although it may have seemed obvious to some male twentieth-century clergy that "[p]eople whose major attention is given to the neckties for the ushers and flowers for the bridesmaids have little mind left for a proper consideration of the significance of the primary act," we need not accept this assumption at face value.⁵¹⁶

American women likely do not always draw sharp lines between becoming Cinderella and feeling the presence of God. Just as mid-twentieth century minister's wives were able to integrate what was "wedding-ish" and what was "Christian," contemporary women may see little contradiction between desiring an experience of consumer transformation and receiving the blessing of a Christian God in a church. If the marketplace stepped in to provide women with sacred meanings for the day of marriage, it may be that they were responding to consumer demand for female-specific sacred symbols, practices and stories, celebration of a new kind of agency – and that this was a demand that institutional Christianity had left largely unmet. But this does not necessarily mean that Christianity remains irrelevant or off-stage. Further ethnographic work with contemporary brides and grooms might confirm this.

Katy Elizabeth ShROUT, "Religious Meaning and the Hollywood Wedding Ritual," (Atlanta: Emory University, 2006).

⁵¹⁶ Trueblood, *The Common Ventures of Life*, 45.

As suggested throughout this study, the criticisms of vain and frivolous women who spend money recklessly on weddings represent a gendered ideology that has served specific purposes and has particular genealogies of power. Yet it is difficult to conclude a study such as this and not question what kind of agency this is that the white wedding has celebrated, particularly this understanding of American female identity as so dependent on consumption and the consumer role. Surely no one would argue in favor of lavish weddings that stretch family incomes to their breaking points. Surely a ritual that relies so prominently upon the physical beauty of the bride is something to be questioned on feminist grounds at very least. Surely it is a performance of gender that draws upon every over-the-top and hackneyed trapping of femininity out there. Surely it is a ritual that can rely upon exclusion, championing an idealized version of white, young heterosexual women at the expense of many others. Yet if the white wedding has been in some large part a ritualization of consumer agency, it is significant that for much of its history, when women lacked many other forms of social and cultural power, this was a validation and performance of an expression of power they *did* have—albeit surely one constrained by many structural influences. In a contemporary setting, we might indeed wonder why this particular form of agency continues to hold so much interest for women. If the sacralization of female consumer agency makes us uncomfortable, we ought to wonder why this form of agency is so crucial in female lives that it still seems to provoke this kind of elaborate ritualization. Rather than assuming that experiencing something extraordinary in practices of consumption suggests uncomplicated vanity, vulgarity and self-indulgence on the part of many North American women of all backgrounds, we might first wonder what these encounters with the numinous offer that other kinds of sacred experiences do not. In the United States, religious practice of all sorts is refracted and magnified through the lens of

consumer culture. The wedding, like many other kinds of popular religious culture, cannot easily be disentangled from either church or marketplace.

Images



IMAGE ONE. Unidentified bride, daguerrotype, 1850. *Courtesy of George Eastman House, International Museum of Photography and Film.*



IMAGE TWO: Tom Thumb wedding, 1924, with a child portraying the minister standing to the right of the bride. *Courtesy of the State Archives of Florida.*



IMAGE THREE: Two students at the Florida State College for Women play the part of the bride and groom in a 1920s all-female wedding pageant. *Courtesy of the State Archives of Florida.*



IMAGE FOUR. A female student at the Florida State College for Women poses in the role of the bridegroom in a 1920s all-female wedding pageant. *Courtesy of State Archives of Florida.*



IMAGE FIVE. Portrait of wedding and guests posing outside a farmhouse, circa 1890. *Courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society, WHS Image ID 5122.*



IMAGE SIX. The 1906 wedding of George Mitchell and Eva Wilson, photographed as though the wedding were in progress. *Courtesy of State Archives of Florida.*



IMAGE SEVEN. Wedding decorations in San Mateo Congregational Church in San Mateo, California, 1900. *Courtesy of the San Mateo Public Library, San Mateo, California.*



IMAGE EIGHT. A Tallahassee bride in the church on her 1956 wedding day, wearing a princess-style crown headpiece. *Courtesy of State Archives of Florida.*



IMAGE NINE. The display window of Cinderella Frocks, a bridal apparel store in Madison, Wisconsin, in 1956. Note the decorative use of a stained glass window, altar and candelabra.

Courtesy of the Wisconsin Historical Society, WHS Image ID 29432.

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