

Traditional Ambivalence and Heterosexual Marriage in Canada Transgressing Ritual or Ritualising Transgression?

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Article abstract

Queer moments abound in traditional rituals associated with marriages and weddings, not only in some regions of English Canada but in most European and European-colonised locations. In the Prairie provinces and Ontario, mock weddings (folk dramatic travesties of the Christian/majoritarian wedding ceremony, usually performed cross dressed) can interrupt wedding showers or milestone anniversary parties. And from Prince Edward Island to British Columbia, charivaris (late night visits to a newly married couple, featuring extreme noisemaking and/or traditional trickery) can follow a marriage. The authors question whether these practices transgress against conventional heterosexual marriage or merely ritualise and thus contain potential resistance to its strictures, and find that they do both.

TRADITIONAL AMBIVALENCE AND HETEROSEXUAL MARRIAGE IN CANADA

*Transgressing Ritual or Ritualising Transgression?*¹

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Marriage is a unique relationship that's definition (sic) as the union of a man and a woman.... Since the beginning of history marriage has changed very little.... Marriages between men and women provide the moral foundation and social norms that allow us to enjoy the personal freedoms we do (FOTF 110401).

These historically and socially deceptive assertions from the website of "Focus on the Family" (FOTF) — a socially, politically, economically, and religiously conservative Right group — make heterosexual marriage seem invariably uncontroversial. But nothing could be farther from the truth.² Even the current definition of marriage employed by the Right hides some fancy footwork around exactly what constitutes "the union of a man and a woman." To quote the same source,

1. We conducted this research thanks to a SSHRCC Standard Research Grant. We thank our anonymous readers for warm support and helpful critique. We draw upon interviews and questionnaires on charivari and related practices from across Canada, gathered on an ongoing basis since spring 2004. Most respondents contacted us after seeing our request for information in local, regional, and national newspapers and periodicals. We also did interviews on CBC radio (various locations across Canada) and worked with historical and genealogical societies. Newspaper and law case online searches also turned up much relevant material about charivari, followed up with archival and oral history investigation where possible.
2. See for example Lisa O'Connell's examination in England in the eighteenth century, showing the coexistence of multiple forms of marriage before the Marriage Act of 1753, which legalised only those "performed by an ordained priest according to the Anglican Liturgy in a parish church or public chapel of

our common law tradition makes it clear that a legal marriage can only occur between a man and a woman. In particular, the case that stands as a precedent is the 1866 British decision in *Hyde v. Hyde*. While it is an old case, no Canadian court has changed its definition of marriage — that being the union of one man and one woman — and several have upheld the definition (FOTF 110501).

In fact, the full *Hyde v. Hyde* definition from 1866 actually says marriage is the “*voluntary union for life of one man and one woman, to the exclusion of all others*” (our emphases). In legal discourse as well as public discussion, the definition indicates both what marriage is, and what it is not. Those marriages that are involuntary or forced, those that are ended by any circumstances other than the death of a spouse, as well as those that fail to align with strict monogamous principles are not considered marriages, valid or otherwise. A selective historical memory leaves by the wayside the inconvenient and/or otherwise problematic voluntary, lifelong, and exclusive properties of this definition. To be specific, for example, the Right wants to be able to force young people who become pregnant to get married, and their members would hardly wish to give up their option to discard an unsatisfactory spouse or to have the occasional fling with another good coreligionist. Yet contrary to FOTF’s assertions, throughout Canadian history, both formal and informal legal and moral systems have seen challenges to particular kinds of matches between individuals whose binary sexual difference was undisputed. Even avowed heterosexuals have encountered community ire, were denied formal legal recognition, and/or had their unions declared unlawful.

Perhaps the most salient absence, however, in both FOTF and *Hyde v. Hyde*, is the central place of fertility in the notion of marriage. Reproduction, in fact, is perhaps the most controversial aspect of weddings and marriages, and often occasions critical responses. The most familiar examples come from the legal realm. Laws against miscegenation — marriage, sexual relations and/or reproduction between folks from different ethnic or racial groups — have a long and distinguished history of brutal repression, even in Canada.³ Those who endured the most vicious effects were women. For example,

the Established Church after thrice called banns or the purchase of a license from the bishop” (1999: 68). Note, of course, the substantial changes in legal and licensing practices since that date. See also Coontz (2005).

3. Canadians often see themselves as people lacking in prejudice, and many are

on a May morning in 1939, eighteen-year-old Velma Demerson and her lover were having breakfast when two police officers arrived to take her away. Her crime was loving a Chinese man, a “crime” that was compounded by her pregnancy and subsequent mixed-race child. Sentenced to a home for wayward girls, Demerson was then transferred... to Toronto’s Mercer Reformatory for Females.... When Demerson was finally released after ten months’ incarceration, weeks of solitary confinement, abusive medical treatments, and the state’s apprehension of her child, her marriage to her lover resulted in the loss of her citizenship status....

Demerson, and so many other girls, were treated as criminals or mentally defective individuals, even though their worst crime might have been only their choice of lover.... in a period that saw the rise of psychiatry, legislation against interracial marriage, and a populist movement that believed in eradicating disease and sin by improving the purity of Anglo-Saxon stock (Demerson 2004: cover).

Or consider *Connolly v. Woolrich*, originally decided in 1867, a case which recognised the Cree marriage — resulting in six children — of a Cree woman to a European man. The court validated Cree marriage law and custom in the absence of Christian clergy. But *Connolly v. Woolrich* was overturned in 1890, rendering such marriages invalid. And between the two decisions, two cases in Québec failed to recognise Cree marriage. The effect was to selectively legitimise the marriages of European men to European women, and to leave the First Nations women and their children without inheritance rights (Busby 2003).

Of course, not all religions nor all cultures have identical definitions of marriage. And even in English common law, marriage to deceased wife’s sister (but not to deceased husband’s brother), and marriage between other persons with certain kinds of physical and cultural kinship connections — also known as incest — were considered not only illegal but also contrary to god’s law.⁴ In addition, the age or capacity of one or more of the parties, an inability to raise the funds for a license, and/or a lack of parental consent, could also stand in the way of marriages that would otherwise fit the Right’s simplistic “union of one man and one woman.”

shocked to learn of historic and ongoing oppression against immigrants, people of colour, and those speaking languages other than English.

4. This is probably a reference to Leviticus 18, the Hebrew Old Testament basis for consanguinity prohibitions. See also Anderson (1982).

But it was not only the legal system that condemned certain kinds of heterosexual marriage. Traditions from a wide variety of European cultural origins excoriated weddings between some individuals whose matches, while not illegal, were nevertheless deemed inappropriate. But perhaps even more surprising is the wealth of popular practices, beginning early and continuing into the twenty-first century, in which apparently exemplary heterosexual matches are questioned, criticised, and countered, indicating a more widespread ambivalence than all those comfortable generalisations on the Right would suggest.⁵ The “moral foundation and social norms” to which FOTF blithely refer are, in fact, more fraught than most people realise.

Our focus on these queer traditions — arguably so primarily because in commonsensical terms, the associated behaviour contradicts their invariable heterocentric and heterosexist justifications — will explore some ways in which charivaris, mock weddings, and other resistant rituals can be understood, not just as a buttress on the edifice of heteropatriarchy, but as a demonstration against and sometimes even a resistance to it.⁶ We detail the Canadian examples, but refer to other European ones to indicate that those on which we focus are by no means anomalous. Ambivalence about heterosexual marriage is more normative than the religious/political Right wants its audience to think.

Contentious Marriage

A relatively well documented example of practices condemning specific types of marriages (but also, conversely, used to mark appropriate marriages in a manifestly ambivalent manner) is the range of wedding-associated practices usually gathered under the heading of “charivari”

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5. In the context of Mennonite weddings, for example, Pamela Klassen shows “how weddings have been an ongoing source of tension within communities” in the areas of “contesting notions of worldliness, controlling sacred space, regulating sexuality and negotiating family relationships” (1998: 226).
 6. Annamarie Jagose helpfully deconstructs the term “queer,” noting that “some claim that it radically erodes the last traces of an oppressive gender coherence, whereas others criticise its pan-sexuality as reactionary, even unfeminist” (1996: 2-3). It is understood in terms of “those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. Resisting that model of stability — which claims heterosexuality as its origin when it is more properly its effect — queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender, and desire” (3). See also Butler (1993).

(Le Goff and Schmidt 1981).⁷ In Canada, charivaris were historically associated with heterosexual marriages considered in some way problematic by the communities in which they took place. Charivari can be understood as an extra-legal form of social control,⁸ “to publicly ridicule an object of communal scorn” (Gilje 1996: 47). Historian Natalie Zemon Davis argues: “At best, a charivari in its boisterous mixture of playfulness and cruelty tries to set things right in a community” (1984: 42). Sociologists Russell P. Dobash and R. Emerson Dobash comment that “Public shamings were attempts to make unspeakable community grievances and private disputes into matters of community concern” (1981: 565).⁹

Canadian historian Bryan Palmer comments that “In nineteenth-century Upper Canada... the charivari was often a force undermining social authority, resolutely opposed by magistrate and police” (1978: 24-25). Specifically, “Three Kingston, Upper Canada, charivaris of the mid-1830s, all directed against remarriage, forced the hand of the local authorities, one leading to two arrests, another necessitating the calling into action of the Summary Punishment Act, the third leading to the creation of a special force of constables, 40 strong, to enforce the peace” (26).

Two early accounts from North America detail the anti-wedding charivari, one from the French¹⁰ and one from the English/American tradition. Bernard DeVoto quotes from the journal of Francis Chardon in his 1833 discussion of Toussaint Charboneau, widower of Sacajawea:

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7. Charivari is also now spelled in ways that closer approximate its English pronunciation; “shivaree” or “chivaree” can often be found in Canadian and American dictionaries. Less standard spellings can be attributed to the fact that their users rarely if ever encounter the term in written forms.
 8. Many social scientists have attempted to quantify the notion of social control as “a mechanism by which a person or group expresses a grievance” (Black 1984: 7).
 9. Two fascinating American historical examples of attempts at popular social control of families are offered in Sievens (2005) and De Wolfe (2002).
 10. Folklorist Monica Morrison sees the disapproval charivari as a French custom: “the shivaree is an especially strong tradition [in Northern New Brunswick], although in character it seems to bear little relation to the custom among the Acadian French to the north and east where it takes on the flavour of overt community disapproval” (1974: 286). Our own recent research suggests that charivaris marking second marriages and marriages of older individuals continue in parts of rural Québec and Acadia.

“the guess that he was seventy-five this summer is conservative.” Charboneau had married a fourteen year old Native girl, and Chardon notes

the young Men of the Fort and two rees [Arikaras] gave to the Old Man a splendid Chariveree, the Drums, pans, Kittles &c Beating; guns firing &c. The old gentleman gave a feast to the Men, and a glass of grog — and went to bed with his young wife with the intention of doing his best (DeVoto 1947: 134).¹¹

A more extensive description is found in Susanna Moodie’s *Roughing It in the Bush*, from 1833. It begins: “I was startled one night, just before retiring to rest, by the sudden firing of guns in our near vicinity, accompanied by shouts and yells, the braying of horns, the beating of drums, and the barking of all the dogs in the neighbourhood. I never heard a more stunning uproar of discordant and hideous sounds” (1997: 151). Mrs. Moodie fears an invasion by Yankees, but instead finds out from her neighbour Mrs. O. that “a set of wild fellows have met to charivari Old Satan, who has married his fourth wife to-night, a young gal of sixteen. I should not wonder if some mischief happens among them, for they are a bad set, made up of all the idle loafers about Port H. and C.” (150-151). The neighbour explains that “when an old man marries a young wife, or an old woman a young husband, or two old people, who ought to be thinking of their graves, enter for the second or third time into the holy estate of wedlock... all the idle young fellows in the neighbourhood meet together to charivari them” (151). She goes on to describe the charivariers’ disguises and demands for drink or money “to treat the band at the nearest tavern” (151). The discordant noise begins if the bridegroom fails to treat or pay.¹²

Mrs. Moodie’s neighbour then goes on to describe other charivaris. At one, a rich storekeeper who has married his third wife bargains with the charivariers, and eventually pays them half of the amount they originally demanded. In another, an African American man, “a runaway nigger from the States” (154) marries an Irish woman and is murdered by the mob.¹³ Yet another charivari also leads to a death — one

11. Our thanks to Anne Morton of the Provincial Archives of Manitoba for this reference.

12. Disguise is not a common element in English Canadian marriage charivaris over the last 150 years or so. Masking and costuming appear more often in events with political intent.

13. Racialised violence was by no means unknown in Canada (see e.g. Backhouse 1999). Miscegenation was considered particularly heinous: “In 1860 a riot

charivari is killed and two others wounded by the bridegroom, who apparently finds the assault on his property and person threatening (154-155).

Mrs. Moodie, unimpressed by the practice of charivari in principle, notes her “truly British indignation at such a lawless infringement upon the natural rights of man” (152). Her neighbour’s view is more forgiving. She explains: “A charivari would seldom be attended with bad consequences if people would take it as a joke, and join in the spree” (155). In general, “It is difficult to conceive that even in tight-knit communities there could not be significant shades of opinion over such a contentious area as gender relations” (Atkinson 1999: 74). Clearly, even in the nineteenth century, the community was by no means in complete accord about the value of charivari or the morality or lack thereof in the practices which precipitated it.

The charivari, as expression of disapproval against a contentious marriage, continued well into the twentieth century. For example, on November 9, 1909, eight boys and men gathered outside the home of William McLaughlin Jr., near Brookdale, Manitoba, to charivari him and his new bride, the former Ethel Burkell. The two had eloped four days earlier. Though several newspapers noted McLaughlin as “a man of good character,” the 35 year old had married the 19 year old Burkell slightly less than eight months after the death of his first wife. Burkell’s father did not approve. The situation clearly called for a charivari.

Most English Canadian charivaris in the early twentieth century involved late night house visiting, noise making (as the contemporary newspapers frequently put it, “making the night hideous”), and usually also a request for money. The reasons for this practice probably relate

broke out in Chatham when a black preacher named Pinckney dared to marry a white schoolteacher.... When blacks stray from their place by such presumptions as marrying a white... some unstable whites have reacted with violence. But they could not have reacted at all if society in general had not already defined that place” (Walker 1980: 88-89). Similarly, Wyatt-Brown discusses the use of charivari and lynching to maintain “white order” in the United States (1983: 436): “For lesser offenses, usually ones committed by whites, the charivari was sufficient. Though different in their levels of violence, both were ceremonies of moral purification through the sacrifice of one or more victims, polluted and profaned [in these]... ecstatic events. The mingling of justice and bacchanalia, centering about the scapegoat, whether a lowly black or an unpopular member of the ruling class, released social tensions in spectacle” (437).

to the particular socioeconomic significance of the husband/wife/children family, which was fundamental to the economic and social base of early twentieth century farming communities. As Cecilia Danysk notes, “the economic contribution of a family was proportionally much greater than their mere numbers, since the costs of their labour and provisions were hidden in their production. Politically and socially, individual farm ownership meant conservative values, while the predominance of families ensured the entrenchment of institutions and fostered social stability” (1995: 70). As Rouleau, Saskatchewan, poet Edith Gordon put it in her 1955 composition about the early twentieth century,¹⁴

We had those pioneer women then, God rest them one and all,
 Who mothered all the bachelors and were always at beck and call.
 They helped bring all the babies in and helped the old depart...
 There were no teenage problems then, each child had work to do —
 From Henry farming with his dad, right down to baby Sue...
 Johnny to the pasture would ride and bring the cows,
 And feed the calves and slop the pigs and pitch down hay from the
 mows;
 Get the kindling and bring in the coal and take the lantern out,
 And help harness the horses when he heard his father shout.
 Mary would feed the chickens and gather the eggs...
 She would also wash the dishes and lamps must be cleaned and filled,
 And make the beds and wipe the floor where water had been spilled.
 While mother was busy kneading the bread she had set the night
 before,
 With potato water and homemade yeast, it was almost a daily chore.
 She would make some pies and some cinnamon rolls as well as cookies
 and cake...
 When Mom was shut in for the winters, she made all the children’s
 clothes,
 Crocheted and tatted and pieced a quilt, knit their mittens and hose...
 Mom braided rugs from coats and pants that could be worn no more,
 And hooked rugs on a gunny sack base to spread before the door...
 (1971: 16-17).

In early twentieth century western Canada, the proportion of men to women was skewed. Women were in such a minority that there was no social stigma on bachelorhood, though they were to an extent figures of fun. Gordon noted:

14. This poem is structured without stanzas, which perhaps not coincidentally underlines the relentlessness of the life described.

Bachelors and mosquitoes were the chief inhabitants then,
And hunting season was open to any girls looking for men.
A bachelor with a rubber tired rig and a speedy little driver,
Quite likely in the race of love would be the soul (sic) survivor...
The married folks held open house, their doors were open wide;
When bachelors came from far and near to share the feast inside.
For during the week they had been living on prunes, dried apples, and
beans,
And sight of a woman's cooking recalled their boyhood scenes.
Biscuits made by the bachelors were the hardest things in the world,
And many a gopher bit the dust from a biscuit neatly hurled (1971:
16-17).

Given their difficult social position, men felt that they had a right to ask for money from someone who married beyond the community's conventional ideas. And indeed, it was not only young rowdies who took license to charivari, but, in the McLaughlin Manitoba case, men as old as 41 year old Joe Wiggins and 33 year old Charles Bugg. Some might suggest that the payment in cases like this would be — like legal damages — in recompense for McLaughlin taking a scarce commodity, a young woman, out of the system of exchange that should involve only young men.¹⁵

But the inadequate resource argument doesn't explain charivaris against widowers or especially widows,¹⁶ or between older, interracial, or interreligious partners. With respect to remarriages, Davis offers, "why then the charivaris? First there was the dead spouse to be placated... Then there were the children from the first marriage to be thought about, psychologically and economically.... And last and most fundamental, there was resentment when someone had been inappropriately removed by an older widow or widower from the pool of young eligibles" (1975: 106). We remain convinced that the "problem" in charivaris is not the individual identities of the participants, but the fertility issues that might be raised by particular matches.

15. The consequences of this charivari, including the death of one charivariar and a charge of manslaughter against the bridegroom brought to the Grand Jury, are detailed in Greenhill (2006).

16. Second marriages were specially marked in New England in the eighteenth century. The economic consequences at the time are indicated by the tradition of "smock marriage" or "marriage in a shift." "It was believed in this country... that if a widow should wear no garment but a shift at the celebration of her second marriage, her new husband would escape liability for any debt previously contracted by her or by her former husband" (Earle 1893: 100).

Marriage is all about reproduction in small communities, to ensure their continuation, the passing of land from fathers to sons. Marriages between racially and religiously different partners would not produce offspring who could be easily incorporated into racially and religiously divided communities. Marriages of older individuals are both less likely to be fertile and more apt to raise concerns about inheritance, especially when bride, groom, or both bring children from a previous marriage into the relationship. Informal law mirrors formal law which attempts to regulate those whom it judges either cannot, or should not, reproduce. Presumably, prohibiting marriage prevented reproduction, and failing that, it prevented the children produced from these unions from being able to inherit.

But the notion of a “mixed” marriage was not confined to racial or religious difference; in some locations, community affiliations occasioned charivaris, suggesting again the significance of the practice in maintaining local group membership. Among German-Russians in Ellis County, Kansas,

marriages between individuals of different settlements were looked upon as “mixed marriages”.... Frequently, fisticuffs resulted on account of a “mixed” wedding. Often, young men on horseback from the one village would “drag Main” of the other settlement involved in the marriage, firing shotguns and, in general, looking for trouble (Terbovich 1963: 82).

Surprisingly, two types of marriage charivaris — punishment and celebration — appear to have coexisted for quite some time in Canada and the United States. The earliest Canadian note we have of a charivari not associated with community disapproval of a mismatched couple was from the *Daily Globe* (Toronto), 1865. “A Fatal Charivari” noted “There was nothing at all peculiar in the match — not even the usual excuse of silly charivaris, that a blooming damsel should not be allowed to link herself to hoary-headed age without due celebration.... where extremes of age meet or there is some other striking want of fitness” (June 8: 1).¹⁷ The detachment of charivari from an age-mismatched or otherwise unconventional couple was also evident in “Heavy Fines,” from 1879: “On the 1st of September a young man named Harry C. Gully married a Copetown woman and in the evening the young couple were made the subjects of a charivari” (*Globe*, September 11: 8). Though

17. In this, as in many other newspaper reports, details of the events are missing.

“shivarees” in early to mid-twentieth century Saskatchewan seem to have been given mainly to those who didn’t invite the entire community to their wedding reception or hold a wedding dance,¹⁸ very few outside Acadian New Brunswick and the province of Québec, from the late 1920s to the present, were about money or involved older couples or couples of different ages. No one we interviewed or received a questionnaire from mentioned interracial marriage, though interreligious marriages (especially between Ukrainians and “English” Protestants) were problematic in parts of Manitoba.

Marriage Contention

An early Ontario account of “shivaree” by William Riddell notes:

When a countryman, farmer, owner, tenant, or laborer, “hired man,” on land got married, it was the custom for many of the neighbouring men and boys approaching manhood — in my country, young lads being rigidly excluded — to congregate early in the night and serenade the bridal couple in the house in which they were spending the nuptial night (1931: 522).

Riddell comments that the original charivari form indicated disapproval, but that in his boyhood and youth it was considered “a compliment and a form of public congratulations” (522).

Those about to be shivareed prepared with doughnuts and cider; “the cider was not infrequently ‘hard,’ and substitution or reinforcement of Canadian whiskey was not unknown” (523). Evidently, the element of eliciting a “treat” remained essential to the charivari. Nevertheless, satisfaction in being Shivareed was not universally felt: sometimes, instead of doughnuts and hard cider, the groom provided a loaded shot-gun; and a hail of snipe-shot sometimes greeted the crowd — it was bad form to use buck-shot for the purpose.... I have never known,

18. A charivari in Kingsbridge, near Goderich, Ontario, which apparently resulted in a death, was explained thus: “It appears that there was some ill-feeling on the part of people around Kingsbridge because they had not been invited to the Dalton-Moss wedding... which was quite a large affair” (*Globe*, June 30, 1906: 1). Our research shows that some charivaris in Saskatchewan were directed against those who did not give a community party, eloped, or did not give a wedding dance. Some were instigated by those not invited to the wedding. According to John Carley of Carman, Manitoba, charivaris were “often for middle age people getting married, particularly if they didn’t have a public wedding for the neighbours” (2005: Q771).

personally, of any fatality at a “Shivaree;” but some were reported in other parts of the Province (523).

Fieldwork in New Brunswick by folklorist Monica Morrison (1974) tended to support this hypothesis of the negative charivari form historically preceding the positive. She argues, “the wedding in Western New Brunswick is an extended celebration: it lasts from the marriage ceremonies through the honeymoon to the shivaree to the shower, sometimes a period of two to three weeks” (1974: 286). Morrison’s informants see the charivari as less optional than some other elements in the marriage ritual complex. For example, one comments: “they never had a shower for him. All they done is just have a shivaree. Because Ted Marvin was a man that — they had everything that they needed and that woman he married, she had the house there and all, she had everything in the cooking line and bedding and everything” (286).

The New Brunswick charivari’s intention of celebration and approval does not mean it lacks the often obnoxious elements of noise or demand for treat. Morrison details:

As soon as they got back the word would get around among the neighbours, usually by telephone, that the couple had returned and that there would be a shivaree for them that night. That afternoon the new husband would go out and buy the treat: hard tack candy, peanuts in the shell, and a couple of boxes of cigars... Whole families would come together, by wagon or automobile, bringing noisemaking equipment: pots, pans, horsebells, harrow discs, horns, shotguns, and almost always the blade of a circular saw with a piece of steel pipe for hitting it. Just as it was beginning to get dark they would gather in the front yard of the bride’s parents house and start to make noise. By this time the bride and groom had “retired” to the spare room, usually a front room with a window (287).

Noisemaking could go on for twenty minutes or more, and

then the couple would appear at the front door dressed in their wedding clothes. If the newlyweds were obstinate and would not come out, the noisemakers would burst in through the front door, go right up the stairs with their horns and circular saw and right to the bedroom door. The couple would usually come out then. Then everybody would go up and congratulate them. The treat was set out in washtubs and cigars were passed out to the men (287).

Morrison's details show that the quasi-extortion of the disapproval charivaris made its way into the approval charivaris, along with other implicitly negative and often destructive elements. The event was explicitly gendered and sexualised, focussing upon the trickery in the couple's bedroom: "its primary purpose is to make the victim uncomfortable and self-conscious and it is likely that this serves to reinforce the married couple's awareness of their new social status" (288). Tricks focus on the bed and nightclothes: "'breaking' the nightgown by cutting holes at strategic points; preventing entry by sewing up the pyjamas; putting nasty things inside (filling them with honey); or making them noisy by sewing bells to them" (289). The groom's friends might subject him to "blackballing, blackening the groom's genitals with shoepolish" (290). Morrison notes that "The women (aunts, sisters, cousins, and best friends) tend to do the bedroom and nightclothes tricks; the men (brothers, cousins, and friends) the automobile tricks" (290-291). The gendered and sexualised focus on fertility is capped by "mock congratulations ('I wish you all the joy, And every six months a boy')" (288).

Many quotations from Morrison's informants play down the negative aspects: "There's no harm in it, you know." "Just to play a little trick on them. That's all they'd do." "They'd do all those things but they'd never do nothing to hurt anybody" (288). We got exactly the same story when we interviewed charivari participants (and victims) looking back on the events through the healing span of twenty or more years. When, after her 1989 article was published, Greenhill actually saw a charivari, she began to understand why it might lead to negative feelings, and even to violence. As she describes it,

the charivari I attended near Kitchener, Ontario in 1991 celebrated the marriage of the sister of one of my Mennonite students (who invited me and my partner John to attend). We arrived about nine on a summer Saturday evening; my student told me (and John confirmed on the basis of their behaviour) that the men had been drinking since about 10:30 that morning, when the farmers' market closed. The men continued to drink heavily in the back room of the house while the women in the kitchen prepared food and tricks (saran-wrapped confetti balls) for the charivari. About eleven we left the house and proceeded to the newlyweds' farm. We were instructed to turn our car lights off only when we reached the farm gate (since the couple lived on a main road). Given the amount of alcohol that many of the drivers had consumed, at my student's suggestion, I cautiously parked

as far away as possible. (Although my own car remained unscathed, I witnessed two fender benders in the farm yard during the evening.)

The noise — most audibly from car horns and chainsaws with the blades removed — began shortly after we arrived and continued until the couple came out — approximately fifteen minutes. (During the noisemaking, several men toilet-papered the entire yard, trees, and farm outbuildings.) The groom came out, joined his friends and began drinking. The bride sat alone on the steps of her house while approximately twenty women streamed in and began a series of traditional tricks — moving the furniture to different rooms, tying all the socks and underwear together, leaving confetti balls in drawers, hanging bras from the kitchen cupboards, and so on. I learned that the bride had been charivariated the night before, and so had just returned her house to normal when it was being made topsy turvy again. She did not look happy. She looked tired and angry. Evidently the balm of time might assuage her feelings, but the sense of “welcome” and “celebration” felt by those looking back on their charivari seemed to have eluded the bride during the event I witnessed. The “positive” charivari, then, is not always so for everyone (edited fieldnotes, June 1991).

Evidently, the fact that a charivari was intended as a celebration of the wedding did not necessarily preclude damage or harm; often such events came to the attention of the authorities because of problems that arose. Morrison comments:

General questioning also brought another kind of response, especially from women. “I don’t like that kind of thing, it can go too far,” followed by a sort of cautionary tale.... “This guy he was drunk and he put a fire extinguisher — a fire hose — he put the stuff in it in the groom’s drink... And he drank it and that poor guy was unconscious for two days... and that guy his kidneys were shot and they had to take them out and he died within a week. And that guy who did it, he didn’t know that the chemical was poison, he probably thought it was just water. But that’s where that sort of thing goes” (1974: 295).

Morrison seems sceptical about how realistic accounts like the above might be.¹⁹ However, a 2003 search through Westlaw uncovered 49 pre-1944 cases in the United States directly or indirectly related to

19. While the actual death of an individual from occurrences such as these may be relatively uncommon, dangerous accidents were not infrequent. For example, Tony Reader of St. Stephen, New Brunswick recalls that “beer was consumed but I recall one chap got very sick indeed from sampling furniture polish left carelessly on the top of the piano!” (2005: Q597).

charivari and seventeen post-1944. While a number of the latter series referred to the New York/Japan fashion boutique “Charivari,” and some concerned anti-choice demonstrations against clinics providing reproductive services to women, a 1964 Missouri case, *State v. Parker* (378 S.W.2d. 274), concerned a celebratory charivari in the Ozarks. Most of the charivaris in these appeal cases did not appear to have been explicitly negative in origin, and yet eight resulted in homicide,²⁰ eight in assault and battery, weapons, and injury-related cases short of homicide,²¹ six in riot or disorderly conduct,²² four in property crimes,²³ and one in an employers’ liability case (for a charivari during a last night theatre performance).²⁴

Even Morrison must admit that not everyone is thrilled about being charivaried. “Everybody gets a shivaree, everybody gets tricks played on them. There are two exceptions in the earlier accounts: the mean (in the sense of stingy or crotchety) person and the couple that is too old.” One of her informants told her: “Well this old maid and this old bachelor got married and did they ever shivaree them. He was too mean to give a treat anyway — he had a store. But finally they did come out and they did pass around a treat. And they went back inside and they wouldn’t come out again” (1974: 292). In another example: “This here Marvin Phillips got married, and this was his fourth wife he had, we went over the shivaree and we couldn’t get them out — guess they was old and sulky and they wouldn’t come out” (294). Nova Scotian Clair Corbin noted: “Depends on who the people were too.

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20. *Patten v. People* 1869 18 Mich. 314; *Choate v. State* 1927 37 Okla.Crim. 314; *State v. Countryman* 1897 57 Kan. 815; *State v. Adams* 1889 78 Iowa 292; *Havens v. Commonwealth* 1904 26 Ky.L.Rptr. 706; *Walker v. Commonwealth* 1930 235 Ky. 471; *State v. Voss* 1921 34 Idaho 164; *Tharp v. State* 1939 65 Okla.Crim. 405.
21. *Bruno v. State* 1917 165 Wis. 377; *Palmer v. Smith* 1911 147 Wis. 70; *Higgins v. Minaghann* 1890 76 Wis. 298; *Gilmore v. Fuller* 1901 99 Ill.App. 272 and 1902 198 Ill. 130; *White v. State* 1879 93 Ill. 473; *People v. Warner* 1918 201 Mich. 547; *Ryan v. Becker* 1907 136 Iowa 273; *State v. Parker* 1964 378 S.W.2d. 274.
22. *Kiphart v. State* 1873 42 Ind. 273; *State v. Voshall* 1853 4 Ind. 589; *Cherryvale v. Hauman* 1909 80 Kan. 170; *State v. Brown et al.* 1879 69 Ind. 95; *Bankus v. State* 1853 4 Ind. 114; *St. Charles v. Meyer* 1874 58 Mo. 86.
23. *Bruno v. State* 1920 171 Wis. 490; *Lebanon Light, Heat & Power Co. et al. v. Leap* 1894 139 Ind. 443; *Cline v. LeRoy* 1917 204 Ill.App. 558; *Combs v. Ezell et al.* 1930 232 Ky. 602.
24. *Novelty Theater Co. v. Whitcomb* 1909 47 Colo. 110.

Sometimes you had to be careful because that trick might be taken not as in fun. And there could have been a retaliation, possibly” (interview PG2005: 9-10). Positive or negative, the wedding charivari is by no means a universally welcomed nor approved practice.

Even for researchers of traditional culture, the surprise is that charivari survives in some parts of rural English Canada. In commonsensical terms, its associated behaviour contradicts its invariable heterocentric justification: to welcome a newly married couple into the community. It is not difficult to see the arrival of rowdy noisemakers demanding money in the middle of the night — the historic charivari — as an expression of disapproval. But even after more than two years of intensive research on the topic, we still find it counter-intuitive that anybody would seek to welcome folks into a community by arriving uninvited late at night, running chainsaws and blowing car horns, initiating a party continuing into the wee hours, and playing a variety of nasty tricks on the couple.

The explanations in the literature are not particularly enlightening. For example, Morrison argues that the shivaree’s “primary purpose is to make the victim uncomfortable and self-conscious and it is likely that this serves to reinforce the married couple’s awareness of their new social status” (1974: 288). Yet more directly, “the primary aim of all wedding night pranks is the same, the inhibition of the sexual act” (289). Folklorist Violet Alford, looking at English “rough music” tradition finds 24 in her collection (no dates, no provenances) “which are in the special group directed at newly married couples as a communal warning and prophylactic treatment” (1959: 506). She argues that such “preventive Charivaris of newly married people” show that they “have graduated into the highest village group, and are given tasks to secure prosperity because the aura of potential parenthood envelopes them” (518).

The idea of the charivari as warning or proof against misbehaviour in the context of marriage may seem illogical, but it is not uncommon. From the Isle of Man, for example, “blowing of horns at weddings is a very old custom, and was formerly not very complimentary to the bride, being intended to remind the bridegroom that conjugal infidelity on the part of the wife, placed the emblems of that crime on the head of the inoffending husband” (Train 1844: n.p., chapter 17).

It is also clear from our research that many women do not feel welcomed — at least not at the time, though they may look back on

the charivari years later with rosy spectacles. Their reaction is not surprising. The trickery addresses symbolically pivotal aspects of the domestic realm. Primarily, it takes place in the bedroom — short sheeting, putting dirty and/or irritating substances into the bed, placing bells on the bedsprings, setting an alarm clock to go off in the middle of the night; in the kitchen — removing labels from canned goods, replacing sugar with salt, hiding and/or rearranging basic cooking supplies and implements; and in the bathroom — saran-wrapping the toilet bowl, squeezing all the tubes in the medicine cabinet, putting jello in the bathtub, and writing lipstick messages on the mirror. More general mess-making and disarray of the household can include putting golden syrup on door handles, running domestic animals through the house, rearranging the furniture, and displaying the bride's underwear in the kitchen. Invariably, the woman is expected on the following day to clean, replace, and discover entirely on her own. Some welcome.

But the practice is not only counter-intuitive, but also counter-productive. Some folks in Ontario told me that a couple could be charivariated any number of times until their first child was manifestly on the way. Surely in this sociocultural grouping, sex is the usual precursor to fertility. And yet the oft-expressed intent of the surprise is to catch the couple unawares in the middle of sex, sometimes even to break into their bedroom, the best result being to find both naked.²⁵ That such interventions were sometimes brilliantly successful is evident in this account from Ontario.

Unknown to us, the gang were all parked further up the street and were biting their nails for fear we spotted their vehicles. We had no idea they were there and went into our apartment for a nice quiet night. We thought. We had a snack, chatted a bit, turned out the lights and settled in for some love making. When our friends saw the lights go out, it was their clue to wait about twenty minutes and then the attack. We first heard someone at the bedroom window and then voices that were familiar to us. Right away I knew it was Shivaree time and we scrambled to throw on some clothes. By this time my best

25. To the question, "How did the charivariers gather?" a man from Shelburne, Ontario replied: "Oh, someone would say let's get together in the evening maybe a ladder up to the couple's bedroom window try and catch them in action. Mostly done to popular couples by their friends years ago" (2005: Q811). A woman from Langenburg, Saskatchewan commented: "When we were married and attended these the couples didn't live together before they were married, so we tried to catch them naked" (2005: Q688).

friend came through the window and headed for the front door to let the rest in. I was worried about my husband as he was still wearing protection and I knew he would be stripped and dressed in something ridiculous, which they did, in a grain sack. They dressed me in my father-in-law's pyjamas, extra large. Not until it was all over did I know how he handled his situation. While he and his buddy were talking he wiggled his fingers until he made a hole in his pocket, took off the protection and handed it to his friend who quietly disposed of it (2005: Q790).

Certainly comfort with sex, not to mention sex itself, is paradoxically discouraged by such practices.²⁶

So, to reiterate, the current charivari welcomes a couple and encourages their fertility by embarrassing them, interrupting sex, and wrecking their home and their possessions (usually only temporarily, but sometimes more permanently). Yet it also addresses community notions of appropriate behaviour: unquestioning hospitality, willingness to deal with the unexpected with aplomb, being a good sport, and taking a joke. It reminds young marrieds that their responsibility is to stay on the farm, continue to do the work their foremothers and forefathers did, and keep the community going. It confirms their community membership, and the responsibilities that go along with it.

The wedding itself, however, is also cloaked in ambivalence. Tears at weddings are presumed "tears of joy." However, they may have a deeper and older significance. "Themes of abduction, abandonment and sacrifice were... common to elite wedding celebrations in early-modern Europe and the practice of lamenting nuptials as if they were funerary rites was routine" (MacNeil 1999: 407). If the tears didn't come naturally, they had to be encouraged,²⁷ as in this description of Russian Siberian traditions, in which it seems lamenting and wailing are ubiquitous.

26. A woman from Ingersoll, Ontario noted: "the young couple was usually alert to the possibility of the charivari until it happened so slept [with their] ears half-open" (2005: Q753).

27. We don't mean to suggest that ritual tears are in any way unreal. As Gary Ebersole states, "to claim that real tears are a spontaneous emotional response to some event leads to the position that insofar as ritual tears are 'scripted,' they are by definition mere formalities, not real tears. But saying this does not so much explain ritual tears as it explains them away" (2000: 214-215).

Sometimes a *voplenitsa* was invited to wedding[s]. She was to wail and to keen in order to drive the bride and surrounding people in[to] such a state [that] they all could not help keening.... In the *devichnik* [wedding day], the bride began to lament, saying goodbye to her girlish freedoms... The morning of a wedding day began with a bride's wail.... [She] said goodbye to beauty, to her friends, to the parental home.... When leaving her home, the bride was to lament even if she like[d] the match (Wedding Rite, n.d., n.p.).

Weddings are often accompanied by shooting, blocking the couple's way, and extracting money (Russian-Germans in Victoria, Kansas [Dinkel 1960: 102-103]). Among Low Germans of Missouri at the turn of the twentieth century,

after the simple, brief ceremony every one hastened to his horse or conveyance. The bride and groom rode in a new spring wagon, drawn by two thoroughbreds.... The whole crowd dashed after this wagon at a dead-run... Every one attempted to overtake and, if possible, to pass the bridal pair. Suddenly the whole racing procession came to an abrupt halt.... A strong chain had been stretched across the road. It was the work of a small boy. The groom cast a handful of small coins among the youngsters (Bek 1908: 62).

Early folklorists made much of this kind of custom, asserting it a survival of marriage by capture. Suggesting that it was once a serious event, where men actually kidnapped women they intended to marry and then had to pay ransom to the women's relatives, some felt that the activity had devolved into this abduction/chase/payment sequence.²⁸ It's more likely, however, that such events display a more contemporaneous ambivalence to marriage.

The elements of danger continue into the current forms of these traditions where cars replace horses and buggies and cases of beer to the groomsmen replace coins to children. Similar ritualised aggression against the newly married couple occurred in New England (not dated but probably nineteenth century).

The ancient wedding sport known in various parts of the British Isles as "riding for the kail," or "for the broose," — a pot of spiced broth — and also called "riding for the ribbon," took the form in America of

28. See also the Russian Siberian: "In ancient times fist[i]cuffs between the newly-weds' kin took place during the *bran'ye* [wedding procession]. The bride's relations showed symbolic resistance and surrendered" (Wedding Rite, n.d., n.p.).

riding a dare-devil race over break-neck, half-cleared roads to the house of the bride to secure a beribboned bottle of whiskey. The privileged Protestants had been in Ireland the only subjects permitted to carry or discharge firearms, and they ostentatiously paraded, at every celebration or festivity, their franchised condition by frequent volleys of blank cartridges. Their descendants kept up the same noisy custom in the new land, and the firing of guns formed a large part of a wedding celebration.... The bride and groom started on their journey with many parting volleys of musketry. In some neighborhoods, as a further pleasing attention, hidden groups of men discharged blank cartridges from ambush at the bridal pair as they rode through the woods.... In some communities still rougher horse-play than unexpected volleys of musketry was shown to the bridal party... Great trees were felled across bridle-paths, or grapevines were stretched across to obstruct the way, thus delay the bridal festivities (Earle 1893: 97-99).

Delay of the marriage was often accompanied by obstruction of the consummation: “the young men of the neighborhood went at dead of night to the house sheltering the newly married couple, pulled them out of bed, and carried the bride downstairs. If the rough invaders found the door locked, they beat it down with an axe” (99). Similarly, in the French rural Auvergne,

after locating the couple in an upstairs bedroom, the youths perform a ritualized practice called *vider le lit* (to overturn or, literally, empty the bed). They tip the bed over so that the bride and groom fall to the floor with the heap of bedclothes. Although they are expecting this invasion, the new couple feigns surprise and indignation. While it is assumed that by now the marriage has been consummated, a fiction holds that the couple may have been interrupted in the marriage act by the youths (Reed-Danahay 1996: 753).

Some customs subject newlyweds to embarrassing or disgusting trials. For example, again in the Auvergne, “a group of unmarried youths bursts into the room to which the bride and groom have retired for the night and presents them with a chamber pot containing champagne and chocolate. This mixture is then shared and consumed by all present” (750). The implications of this Rabelaisian feast are underlined in current traditions when “they add bananas that have been coated with melted chocolate.... Toilet paper is now also included, and, recently, tampons colored with tomato sauce or food coloring have been added to the mixture.... A great deal of sexual and scatological joking accompanies this passing around and sharing of the contents of the chamber pot” (753).

Ritualised violence is sometimes even more explicitly directed. For example, in Siberian Russia, “the wife was to take off [her] husband’s boots, demonstrating her obedience [by giving] him a lash... When accepting the lash the husband gently stroke[d] his wife thrice in order to strike her never more in domestic family life” (Wedding Rite, n.d., n.p.). Sometimes the violence may be less ritualised than actual, as in “the widely-found practice of beating the bride or bridegroom” (Thomas 1906: 279). Yet even once the marriage is well underway, the couple is not necessarily free of ritualised community interference.

Many trials were prepared for newly-weds. They had to separate sweepings from money, to split firewood on the [floor] in the house, to regale guests with pancakes... Often the new family started [a] hard life after [the] wedding. The young wife had to get accustomed to [unfamiliar] people, to prepare [for] motherhood... Newly-weds were remembered again during Shrovetide and after Easter. Youths rolled them down hillocks, seeking to overturn them into snow, held the wife to ransom her husband, [who] was buried in snow (Wedding Rite, n.d., n.p.).

Even then, there is no presumption of the success of the match. In Essex, England, on Whit Monday, for example, the Dunmow Flitch is “awarded... to claimants stating upon oath that, having been married for at least a year and a day, they have never once, ‘sleeping or waking,’ regretted their marriage or wished themselves single again” (Hole 1978: 85). Evidently, it has always been expected that those who can honestly make such an oath are few and far between.

Making Fun of Weddings

Mock weddings are even more manifestly queer. This tradition, although less well known than charivari, also has a long history. It includes, for example, a staged marriage in mid-eighteenth century England between a six or seven year old boy and his younger cousin, performed by his clergyman father, presumably for the entertainment of the adults present (O’Connell 1999: 71). In all male contexts, like that described by Charles Manby Smith, an apprentice printer in the 1830s, mock weddings demonstrate considerable ambivalence to the practice of heterosexual marriage via a combination of racist misogyny and implicit celebration of homosociality. In this all male group, the marriage of one of their number was celebrated by a grotesque travesty of the words and rituals of the wedding procession and ceremony.

The impersonation of the bride is looked upon as the cream of the joke. The person selected to play the part was the tallest, stoutest and strongest fellow in the house, and he was dressed precisely in imitation of the black doll that hangs suspended over a rag-shop, save that he carried before him two stuffed mountains of bosoms, perfect phenomena in their way, and glittering with jet polish, surmounted with a hideously grotesque black mask. In every room that he passed through... it was his business to faint and go into hysterics, in the execution of which duty he performed the most astonishing feats of strength, flooring his attentive partner by the convulsive extension of his arms or legs, and upsetting his supporters on all sides till half of them were sprawling on the floor, and invariably refusing to “come to” without the indulgence of a long and strong pull at a black bottle borne by the master of ceremonies for the sole sustentation of the lady, and ostentatiously labelled “Old Tom” (Smith 1857: 254-255).

The confirmation of this evaluation — that marriage and women alike were monstrous and repellent — came in the address to the bridegroom.

Of this address it is impossible to present the reader with a single line, out of regard to mere considerations of decency. Enough to say that it was perfectly unique in its character — that every conceivable joke upon the subject of matrimony, intensified in obscenity by the powerful alembic of a depraved imagination, was brought into requisition, and a hundred technical expressions peculiar to the trade, endowed for the nonce with an indecent signification, added a welcome savour to the much-relished display. These addresses are perfect marvels of the sort, exhibiting, as they generally do, the connexion of language studiously decorous and well-chosen, with ideas grossly filthy and disgusting (257).

In Canada — specifically in the Prairie provinces and Ontario — mock weddings rowdily interrupt festivities celebrating heterosexual marriages — most often wedding showers or milestone anniversary parties (Greenhill 1988; Taft 1997). Cross dressed friends and relatives repeat parodic vows — “For better but not for worse; for richer but not for poorer” (Greenhill 1988: 182). The texts travesty conventional mores in general, and marriage in particular: “matrimony... is a hell of an institution, and who in the hell wants to be in an institution?” (184). Or they can address the honoured couple or specific members thereof. As participants recall,

[my cousin] really wanted a goat, so my uncle brought a goat in and they dressed it up as the bridesmaid and they brought it down this

street. And I thought, “Oh my god, I hope no one that knows me is around”.... They paraded the goat from up on the corner, down the street, and into the driveway. And then of course they had the goat dressed up with a hat... and a scarf around it, and then had flowers on it (188).

The mock wedding text and performance reverses all of the marriage ritual’s implications, suggesting that the bride and groom are not only not virginal, but that they have been sexually active to an extraordinary degree. The bride may be pregnant — with implications that the groom is not the child’s father. The “maid” of honour may also be pregnant — this time, ideally by the groom. While the traditional wedding ceremony’s request that the assembled multitudes speak their objections to the marriage or forever hold their peace is mainly fictive, the mock wedding audience is expected to object vigorously. And while one bride suggested that the mock wedding said “don’t take yourself so seriously. Don’t take [the wedding] overly seriously” (199), it screams anthropological deep play, the intense exploration of culturally ambivalent practices. Weddings are notoriously tense occasions. Yet their participants and creators do not see the mock wedding as a satire on weddings, or as a critical comment on their significance and meaning. Instead, they point out the inconsistencies between the real and the ideal, the expectation and the experience, and the ritual and the quotidian, and mediate them through humour.

Queering Weddings

So, queer moments abound in traditional rituals associated with heterosexual weddings in some regions of English Canada. Perhaps these practices more often ritualise, and thus curb potential resistance to social strictures of heterosexual marriage, than they transgress it. But we do need to add what we see as a slightly more optimistic conclusion; not about marriage, we assure you, but about queer moments in heterosexual events. Our suggestion comes from the insights garnered from looking at other queer elements in traditional culture, from the cross dressing women in Anglo North American balladry (Greenhill 1995), to the multiple sexualities implicated in traditional song (Greenhill 1997) to the trans-species love celebrated in the Grimms’ fairytales (Greenhill forthcoming).

We don’t think that the original singers of the traditional ballad “The Soldier Maid” loved it because a woman gets to avoid heterosex

and court another woman. Nor do we think that the German servants and their charges who narrated the tales the Grimms collected from them favoured bestiality. But we do think that these kinds of textual situations offer possibilities for an imagination that goes beyond heteronormativity. And the implicitly coded messages are there, hiding in plain sight, for anyone who wishes to find them. Surely the (closeted?) queer 10% in conservative rural Alberta revel — at least sometimes — in the public performance of their desires in the mock wedding. And surely at least some of the hostility manifest in the charivari faces against the conventional strictures of the community enjoining “the union of one man and one woman.” Social chaos? We sincerely hope so.

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