

How Pop Culture Shapes the Stages of a Woman's Life

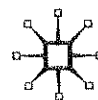
From Toddlers-in-Tiaras to Cougars-on-the-Prowl

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First published 2016 by
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

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ISBN 978–1–137–56617–1

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Ames, Melissa, 1978– author. | Burcon, Sarah Himsel, 1965– author.
Title: How pop culture shapes the stages of a woman's life : from toddlers-in-tiaras to cougars-on-the-prowl / Melissa Ames, Sarah Burcon.
Description: Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire : New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2015035336 | ISBN 9781137566171 (hardback)
Subjects: LCSH: Women in mass media. | Mass media—Influence. | Popular culture—United States.
Classification: LCC P94.5.W652 U616 2016 | DDC 302.23082—dc23
LC record available at <http://lccn.loc.gov/2015035336>

Typeset by MPS Limited, Chennai, India.

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Love, American Style: Gendered Representations of Marriage in the Media

On Valentine's Day 2014, former Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice was videotaped as he dragged his unconscious fiancé, and now wife, Janay Palmer, out of an elevator after delivering a punch that knocked her out. The incident, which Janay Rice claimed was a one-time event, served to draw attention to domestic violence – which is much needed given some sobering statistics about this widespread problem. For example, 4,774,000 women in the United States experience physical violence by an intimate partner every year; 18,000 women have been killed by men in domestic violence disputes since 2003; and 40–45 percent of women in physically abusive relationships are raped and/or assaulted during the relationship.¹ While the coverage of the Rice incident prompted media commentary on domestic violence – bringing awareness to grim statistics such as these – it also provided an opportunity for people everywhere to voice their strong, unsolicited opinions about how Palmer should have reacted to the situation. Countless negative posts were made by the general population in the comment sections of online news stories covering the event, with many posters criticizing Palmer's decision to stay with her husband after his abusive act. (This negative commentary prompted an equally strong online conversation, #WhyIStayed, a hashtag that encouraged women to tell their stories of domestic violence.) The Rice/Palmer coverage is simply one of the latest in a long string of celebrity marriage controversies that has seemed to give the public permission to provide a running commentary concerning the real-life domestic troubles of men and women who happen to live out part of their lives in the limelight.

Consider, too, the ample media coverage about adulterous celebrities. While such situations are less serious than those involving domestic abuse, the public still feels compelled to voice opinions (on talk shows,

on websites, etc.) about famous philandering husbands. For example, in 2009 it was publicized that Tiger Woods had cheated on his wife, model Elin Nordegren, multiple times; and in 2010 the scandal broke that Jesse James had cheated on his movie star wife, Sandra Bullock, with several women. In situations like these, the public reprimands the unfaithful husband at the same time that it offers judgments on how the wife should handle the situation. Sometimes this sage advice-giving is accompanied by supportive online posts. For instance, one online comment following a *US Weekly* article about Bullock noted: 'It's a blessing he is out of her life'.² However, all too often, judgmental posts move beyond directives on how to cope with marital infidelity and result in victim blaming, as seen in this online user's comment: 'Dumb woman for marrying Jesse, truth!'³ Amidst an array of cultural texts already lying in wait to instruct women on how to act – and to potentially shame them for not acting accordingly – such online forums are but one more space wherein women receive informal lessons on how society thinks they should act. While the didactic messages found on comment boards and social media may not actually even be read (or taken seriously) by celebrities like Palmer and Bullock, this unsolicited advice still reaches a large audience of women. One message this sends is that grown, married women still *need* to be told how to handle marital situations, that they are not capable of making their own decisions and dealing with problems as they see fit. Another message is that women should be aware that, at any time, outside forces may sweep down and tell them that they're not performing as wives in the way that society thinks they should. If married men are kings of their castles, then that just means that women are queens on display for the whole world to watch, judge, and dethrone when necessary.

In the previous chapters we spoke of ways in which women are instructed on *how to get* married. We discussed how young girls are taught early on that fairytales can come true, and they can find their Prince Charming if they do the right things, wear the right clothes, and behave in a proper manner. Similarly, once women are married, they are inundated with magazines, self-help books, films, television shows, and so forth that work to train them on how to *remain* married. In this chapter we discuss how this training has evolved (or not) throughout the years and then turn to some contemporary popular culture examples that reveal the ways in which 21st-century women are being instructed on how to be a proper wife.

Anthropologists and archaeologists have debated the origins of the role of marriage in various societies. Two of the most common claims,

according to marriage researcher Stephanie Coontz, are that marriage offered women protection by men or, quite the opposite, marriage existed 'so men could exploit women.'⁴ Some 1970s feminists and other researchers who have sided with this second theory argue that

the origins of marriage lay not in the efforts of women to attract protectors and providers but in the efforts of men to control the productive and reproductive powers of women for their own private benefit. According to this oppressive theory, men coerced women into marriage, often using abduction, gang rape or wife beating to enforce their will [...] For example, fathers gained power in the community by passing their daughters out to young men, who gave the fathers gifts and services in return.⁵

Although the latter theory still has supporters today, it is unlikely that either theory is plausible. Rather, marriage probably began as a way to provide companionship and to structure childrearing and everyday tasks.⁶

Although the reasons people get married in the 21st century are likely similar to the reasons they got married over the past 100 years, companionship being chief among these, what *has* changed is how we perceive marriage. For example, some magazine and news articles suggest that contemporary married couples feel they have fairly egalitarian marriages, or at least they began their relationships believing this would be the case. However, what has not changed – despite the fact that women are delaying marriage and sometimes forgoing their spouse's name – is the fact that cultural texts still spend an inordinate amount of time training women on how to become a proper 'Mrs.' In this chapter we show how 21st-century texts often work within the patriarchal setting to sometimes promote, and occasionally counteract, idealized notions of marriage. Moreover, we suggest that the lessons thrust upon women at this stage of their lives on how to care for their marriage carry over into the next stage, in which women are cast into roles as the primary caregivers for the children they're supposed to have.

The genesis of marriage: why people say 'I do'

If asked why people normally marry, many men and women today would probably give a stock answer: for love. But in the 12th century, Andreas Capellanus proclaimed an opposing view in *The Art of Courtly*

Love: 'Everybody knows that love can have no place between husband and wife.'⁷ Since this text was written centuries ago, we might question what compelled Capellanus to express such a statement at that time in history, and also, what caused such drastic changes in beliefs surrounding marriage in the years since his text's publication. It is not exactly clear when people first began marrying for love. Some have claimed the 17th or 18th century first saw marriages based on love, while others suggest that the 13th century founded the notion of a 'love match.'⁸ But research does indicate that love was not always considered to be such a positive attribute in a relationship. In fact, love

was considered a serious threat to social order [...] In ancient India, falling in love before marriage was seen as a disruptive, almost anti-social act. The Greeks thought lovesickness was a type of insanity [...] In the Middle Ages, the French defined love as a 'derangement of the mind' that could be cured by sexual intercourse, either with the loved one or with a different partner.⁹

Coontz maintains that the 'love match,' versus an arranged marriage, materialized in the 18th century and coincided with the European Enlightenment. At this point in history, marriage 'came to be seen as a private relationship between two individuals rather than one link in a larger system of political and economic alliances.'

A term that is often tied with love and marriage is romance. Indeed, for some people today, romance is synonymous with love. However, historians believe that it was not until the 19th century that romance was linked to marriage.¹⁰ In the 21st century yet another association has become affixed to the concept of marriage: intimacy. In *Modern Love: Romance, Intimacy, and the Marriage Crisis*, David Shumway argues that there are some important distinctions between romance and intimacy. While romance suggests 'adventure, intense emotion, and the possibility of finding the perfect mate,' intimacy suggests 'deep communication, friendship, and sharing that will last beyond the passion of new love.'¹¹ In short, then, Shumway suggests that intimacy implies endurance, whereas romance appears more transitory.

Romance, intimacy – they sound like just a bunch of buzzwords that adorn Hallmark cards that celebrate coupledom, right? Well, yes, but these words also decorate the pages of countless self-help books tasked with saving and maintaining partnerships. In Chapter 3 we made the claim that the continued popularity of self-help books might be due to

the post-9/11 moment, a time in which people are seeking security in an insecure time. Similarly, this chapter argues that Americans look to self-help books in order to regain and/or retain a sense of security in this contemporary time of shifting cultural sentiments, of fluctuating socio-cultural factors that can thwart a couple's chances of making it to their supposed 'happily-ever-after.' As we will discuss later in this chapter, women are often given the role of 'keeper of the marriage,' tasked with ensuring that their relationship will last until death do they part. As such, the self-help genre that profits from this societal pressure placed upon women is important to analyze as women oftentimes turn to these products in order to be instructed on how to perform their assigned role and, ultimately, make the marriage work.

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