

Marriage à-la-Mode 1743-45

Marriage à-la-Mode or "The Fashionable Marriage" is Hogarth's scathing satire on the arranged marriages of the rich. His six-part series of paintings, and later engravings, show the disastrous consequences of marrying for money rather than love.



1. The Marriage Settlement

Two fathers, sitting at the table, are arranging the marriage of their children. The one on the right, "The Earl of Squander", is aristocratic but poor, the one on the left is a rich Alderman of the City of London. ("Squander" means to waste money in a reckless or foolish manner.) One father, the Earl, will gain money through the marriage – the cash has already been emptied out onto the table, and the other, the Alderman, will gain an aristocratic title and social prestige. Love just doesn't come into it.

Outside the window, you can see the Earl's new mansion which is only half-built. Construction has stopped and a money-lender, at the table between the two men, is negotiating payment with the aristocrat for further construction. This symbolises the marriage's rocky foundations. However, the

design is also flawed. In the classical style of architecture, columns should always be used in even numbers. In this case, there are three columns at the entrance and this shows the Earl of Squander has poor artistic taste as well as poor morals.

The Earl, who has gout, as indicated by his bandaged foot, is proudly pointing to his family tree which goes back to William, Duke of Normandy. His other hand is on his heart, which pumps with noble blood.

The Alderman, who is plainly dressed, is holding the marriage contract and peering at it through his spectacles. He is wearing his gold chain of office and a sword which is poking out from between his legs. He doesn't look comfortable and is well aware of how much it is going to cost him to marry his daughter to the Earl's son. There is an inkstand, quill pen, sealing wax and candle on the table ready for signing and sealing the deal.

The Alderman's daughter, sitting behind him, is listening to a young lawyer, Silvertongue, and polishing her wedding ring. The Earl's son, the Viscount, is admiring his face in the mirror and taking a pinch of snuff. The couple clearly have no interest in each other.

Gloomy old master paintings line the walls, while a screaming Medusa hanging over the bride expresses what she is probably feeling. A large black spot on the Viscount's neck indicates that he has syphilis. His fashionable French dress suggests that he has probably travelled around Europe on the Grand Tour and may have picked up syphilis, known as the French disease, while abroad.

The two dogs chained to each other in the corner reflect the position of the young couple.



2. The Tête à Tête

It is now a few months after the wedding and there are signs that the marriage has already begun to break down. The phrase 'tête à tête' implies an intimate conversation but the husband and wife appear uninterested in each other. Their home, which is in a bit of a mess, reflects this. The servant is rolling his eyes towards heaven and holding a stack of unpaid bills which demonstrates that the couple are not taking care of the household. The piece of paper on the spike records the date of the painting: 1743. The servant in the adjoining room looks like he has just woken up.

The interior design of the home shows the couple have bad taste. There is a battered antique bust on the mantelpiece among a collection of fashionable but fake Chinese figures. The wall clock is of a ridiculous design with two fish, a cat and a Buddha with a pair of twisted candlesticks sticking out of his loins, all surrounded by excessive foliage.

The wall clock shows the time to be a little after noon. The tired Viscountess, who seems to have given a card party the previous evening, is at breakfast. Her open posture suggests that she has been unfaithful and the two violin cases on top of one another on the upturned chair hint at the fact that she

wasn't only playing cards the night before. There are other details too: a carving of a man's head on the mantelpiece next to her, a painting in the next room covered with a curtain but revealing a bare foot on a bed and a small mirror in her hand which she may be using to signal to someone. She seems to be looking at her husband with a very smug expression on her face. She is clearly very pleased with herself.

The Viscount has returned exhausted from a night out, probably spent at a brothel. The clues to this are the ladies' caps: one is being pulled out of his pocket by the dog and the other one is wrapped around the broken sword on the floor. The broken sword indicates that he has also been involved in a fight. The large black spot on his neck, denoting syphilis, is clearly visible and his face perfectly expresses his youth and dissipation.



3. The Inspection

Here the Viscount is visiting the French doctor, Monsieur de la Pillule. The Viscount is unhappy with the mercury pills he has been given which are meant to cure his syphilis and he is demanding a refund. He is with a young prostitute who is dabbing an open sore on her mouth, an early sign of syphilis. The older woman is probably the girl's mother and madam. (A madam is a woman who runs a brothel.)

The woman's sleeves are cut from the same material as the girl's skirt which, along with the apron, is far too long, suggesting she may be wearing her mother's clothes. There is a tattoo 'FC' above the woman's left breast which indicates that she is a convicted prostitute and it looks like she has forced her own daughter into the same profession. The black spots on the woman's face show that she too has syphilis. She is angry with the Viscount for infecting her daughter with this disease and, no doubt, he will have to pay her compensation.

The girl is standing between the Viscount's open legs which suggests that she is 'his' girl and there is a pill box next to his groin which implies that they are both there to be treated for the sexually transmitted disease. Venereal diseases were very common at this time but they were not easily cured.

The doctor himself is riddled with the disease – the sunken bridge of his nose, his bulging forehead, thick lips, probable toothlessness and deformed legs are all signs of advanced congenital syphilis. The skull on the table has small black holes which indicate the disease. It seems unlikely that the doctor's pills will work if he can't cure himself.

His consulting room is full of very strange objects which suggest that he works as a physician, surgeon, barber, apothecary and chemist.



4. The Toilette

This scene takes place in the wife's bedroom. The old Earl has died and the son is now the new Earl, as shown by the coronet on top of the bed. His wife is now the Countess. She is sitting at her dressing table which also has a coronet on the top. She is following the aristocratic French fashion of receiving visitors during the final stage of her *toilette* (morning grooming ritual).

The Countess sits with her back to her guests as she only has eyes for her lover, the lawyer Silvertongue, who we saw in the first scene. He is very relaxed with his feet up on the sofa and he is offering the Countess a ticket to a masquerade. He is pointing to a painted screen on which a masquerade is taking place. He seems to be suggesting that he and the Countess should go in disguise as a friar and a nun, just like the figures on the screen.

Masquerades had become very popular in the 18th century. There is a large portrait of Silvertongue hanging by the bed.

At this time, it was fashionable for ladies to keep black slave boys to serve tea and provide entertainment. They were dressed in exotic clothes and treated as toys. In this case, the child is laughing and pointing to the antlers on the statue of Actaeon. The antlers represent the horns of a cuckold. A cuckold is the husband of a woman who commits adultery. This confirms that the Countess is having an affair with Silvertongue.

There is a coral baby's teether hanging from the back of the Countess's chair, indicating that she is now a mother and that she sees her child occasionally.

Behind the Countess her hairdresser is testing the heat of the curling tongs on a piece of paper. An opera singer and his flautist entertain the Countess's guests while a black servant, or slave, offers them cups of chocolate. Next to the flautist is a man with horn-shaped curling papers in his hair.

A collection of playing cards and visiting cards are scattered on the floor from new aristocratic acquaintances inviting the Countess to various events.

As continuing evidence of bad taste, the Countess's recent purchases have been spread out in front of her, still showing their auction lot numbers. She has bought more items similar to those on the mantelpiece in scene two.



5. The Bagnio

After the masquerade, as shown by the masks on the floor, the Countess and her lover Silvertongue have taken a room above the Turk's Head – a Turkish baths or bagnio. Turkish merchants established Turkish baths in London, often with coffee houses attached. Although some were respectable establishments, others became known as houses of ill repute, as seems to be the case here. By 1740, the word bagnio came to mean a place where rooms were provided for the night with no questions asked.

The scene is set at night by firelight. The Countess is dressed in her nightgown and cap and her hooped underskirt, fashionable shoes and mask have been thrown on the floor beside the bed, knocking over the chair. Her corset has fallen on a bundle of sticks, known then as a faggot, to be used on the fire. The term 'faggot' was then a derogatory term for a prostitute. The corset has begun to catch fire.

The young Earl has followed the Countess and Silvertongue and is dying from a wound inflicted by Silvertongue who escapes through the window, while the Countess begs for forgiveness. Hogarth depicts the Earl in a slow, dying fall. His head is framed by the mirror behind him, which reminds us that he

was looking at himself in the mirror at the beginning of the story. As he dies, the black spot on his neck is still conspicuous.

Silvertongue's bloody sword lies on the floor across the shadow of a pair of fire tongs, which echo the Earl's long legs. A tapestry of the Judgement of Solomon hangs on the back wall and the woman in the portrait hanging above the table is holding a squirrel, which was also a derogatory word for a prostitute. She is holding a parasol which dangles down towards a man's legs that appear on the tapestry below the picture, which has sexual connotations.

A candle flame below the picture flickers in the draught between the open window and the door, through which the proprietor of the Turk's Head comes to investigate the cause of the commotion. He has brought with him a constable who carries his staff of office and a night watchman with his lantern.

The Countess's tears cannot extinguish the fire she has started. Her husband is dying and her murderous lover has deserted her and fled. The parasol of the woman in the picture is pointing down to the kneeling Countess to suggest that they are as bad as each other.



6. The Lady's Death

This is the final scene of the story. The Countess has returned to her miserly father's house after her lover, Silvertongue, has been hanged at Tyburn for the murder of her husband, as printed in the newspaper at her feet.

The Countess has drunk laudanum – a mixture of opium and alcohol – probably the entire contents of the bottle lying empty on the floor. A nurse is lifting her child to kiss her goodbye. It is clear from the black spot on its face, the sunken bridge of its nose and its deformed legs encased in surgical boots and braces that the child has congenital syphilis. Therefore, it is unlikely to live long, bringing an end to the family tree so proudly displayed by the Earl of Squander in the first scene.

At that time suicide was a crime in England and the possessions of someone committing suicide had to be given up to the Crown. To avoid this, the Alderman removes his daughter's wedding ring from her finger, rather than say goodbye to her as she takes her final breaths. While holding out her arm he prevents her from embracing her child.

He is dressed as he was in the first scene – very plainly. He is not fashionable and has no taste. His house is bare except for pictures of Dutch low-life scenes on the walls. The table is set for a meagre meal – a boiled egg sits upright on a plate of rice and the starving dog is gnawing at the ear of the pig's head. The silver punch bowl on the table is the only luxury item in the room. The Alderman probably received this for his service to the City of London.

The apothecary, who is wearing a posy in his buttonhole, appears to have a stomach pump and bottle of syrup in his pocket. He is accusing the servant of getting the laudanum for the Countess but he was probably treating her with it himself. He is worried about receiving the blame because she has drunk the lot.

Behind the Alderman the doctor leaves the room as there is nothing more he can do. He is looking at the row of fire buckets hanging on the wall in the hallway. The Alderman, unlike his daughter, never starts a fire he can't extinguish.