

# UNHAPPILY EVER-AFTER

How a promise of future happiness is used to regulate desire and behaviour in Protestant  
Evangelical Christianity

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## **Abstract**

In this thesis, I consider how Protestant Evangelical Christian teaching on sexuality and marriage interacts with the marriage narratives and happiness discourse which pervade popular culture and promote the wedding day as the happiest day of one's life. In doing so, I follow Sara Ahmed (2010) who, through a study of film, literature and common speech acts, argues that attaching a promise of future happiness to certain objects, such as marriage and family, allows happiness to function as an "orientation device" (p54) which regulates behaviour. I argue that we must also ask how happiness, specifically an idea of happiness-via-marriage, functions in Protestant Evangelical discourse on sexuality and marriage.

It is widely acknowledged that Protestant Evangelical churches teach and maintain normative views on sexuality and marriage. It is assumed this teaching is due exclusively to biblical imperative. Rarely though is it explicitly asked what role extra-biblical sources or cultural narratives play in legitimising this teaching. I argue that within Protestant Evangelical discourse, ideas and understanding of happiness, salvation, and marriage easily merge. This conceptual merging creates a dangerous dichotomy: A happy marriage becomes a sign of salvation and right expression of faith, whereas, the Christian identity and sexuality of the unmarried or unhappy believer is considered suspect.

## **Statement of Candidate**

I certify that this thesis is entirely my own work and that I have given fully documented references to the work of others. This thesis has not previously, in part or in whole, been submitted for a higher degree at any other university or institution.

Rosemary Clare Shorter

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## Introduction

In this thesis, I consider how Protestant Evangelical<sup>1</sup> Christian discourse on sexuality and marriage interacts with the marriage narratives and happiness discourse which pervade popular culture and promote the wedding day as the happiest day of one's life. In doing so, I follow Sara Ahmed (2010) who, through a study of film, literature and common speech acts, argues that attaching a promise of future happiness to certain objects such as marriage and family, allows happiness to function as an "orientation device" (p54). Happiness "provides a script" (p55) for how to live, as "happiness functions as a promise that directs you towards certain objects, as if they provide you with the necessary ingredients for a good life ... happiness is assumed to follow from some life choices and not others" (p54). Attaching happiness to some lives and choices and not to others prescribes "the very terms through which individuals share their world with others, creating 'scripts' for how to live well" (p59). Consequently, promising happiness, and simultaneously threatening unhappiness, becomes a method of regulating behaviour and replicating normative modes of existence. I argue that we must also ask how happiness, specifically a happiness-via-marriage script, functions in Protestant Evangelical discourse on sexuality and marriage.

### Scripture Alone, or Scripture Plus Happiness?

It is widely acknowledged that Protestant Evangelical churches teach normative views on gender, sexuality and marriage. The Sydney Diocesan Doctrine Commission report, edited by Mark Thompson (2015), on *Human Sexuality and the 'Same Sex Marriage' Debate*, is a case in point. These views are often dismissed, by those of us who identify as "progressive" or "feminist", as limited or even oppressive and of little relevance to society more broadly. J Halberstam argues in *Gaga Feminism*, "when it comes to gender norms and sexual mores,

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<sup>1</sup> In using the term "Protestant Evangelical", I am primarily referring to the Anglican, Episcopalian and Church of England churches in Australia, America and the United Kingdom. I choose Protestant Evangelical to refer to Christians who uphold the authority of the bible (often, but not always, opting for a literal reading of the text), the centrality of salvation by grace, personal belief and commitment to evangelism. In this I broadly follow Amy DeRogatis (2005) who uses the term as an "umbrella term for Protestants who affirm the necessity of a spiritual rebirth" (p99). DeRogatis also suggests that "while evangelicals may tend toward more or less ecstatic forms of worship (Pentecostals, fundamentalist, charismatics, holiness), they are grouped together by their literal reading of the Bible, their emphasis on inerrancy, the imminent return of Christ, mission-mindedness, and in many cases—though certainly not all—their suspicion of "worldliness" and the perils of secular culture" (p99).

religion really is the root of all evil”, and “Christianity in particular has not been held properly accountable for all of the violence and misery that it has brought upon the world through its missions and morality” (2012, p28). Similarly, (appropriately named) Feminist Theologian, Carol Christ, has described the link between religion and gendered systems of oppression by defining patriarchy as “an integral system of interlocking oppressions, enforced through violence and legitimated by religions” (2016, p223).

It is assumed this teaching is due exclusively to biblical imperative. Rarely though is it explicitly asked, either by reformers or critics of the church, what role extra-biblical sources or cultural narratives play in legitimising this teaching. Following Ahmed (2010), I explore the use of happiness as an orienting and disciplinary device, and ask if happiness also works to regulate behaviour in Christian culture and discourse (not the bible). I consider how happiness, specifically a promise of future happiness in marriage, is used in Protestant Evangelical discourse to encourage heteronormative patterns of gendered behaviour and sexual desire. I argue that within Protestant Evangelical discourse, ideas and understanding of happiness, salvation, and marriage easily merge. A happy marriage becomes a sign of salvation; conversely both the Christian identity and sexuality of the unmarried or unhappy believer is suspect.

We must ask, then, how a promise of happiness-via-marriage is used to regulate behaviour in Christian contexts. We must ask this not only because of the influence on Christian subjects, but because, as we know, concepts of Protestant morality or so-called ‘Christian Values’ have a significant influence on political and cultural discourse on gender and sexuality. We see this currently in Australia around debates on same-sex marriage. Regardless of whether a person, or society, aligns with the teaching of the church, Protestant Evangelical assumptions and teaching on marriage and sexual expression have consequences that extend beyond the lives of those sitting in church pews.

### **A Personal Problem, A Cultural Problem**

The presence of, what I refer to as, a happiness-via-marriage script and the popularity of marriage narratives within Protestant Evangelicalism is concerning. The way we conflate marriage with a promise of guaranteed happiness, evoked in the fairy-tale ending of ‘happily ever-after’, is problematic. By ‘we’, I mean both the faith community which has contributed to my developing sense of self (and to which I still belong), and also the wider circle of western culture in which I live.

Consider how happiness is a sell-point for dating services. On my Facebook newsfeed, a sponsored ad from a popular company asks, “Are you enjoying dating? We Are Australia’s Most Caring Dating Service. Established since 1986. No flings, No One Night Stands. Our Passionate Consultants Only Work with Genuine Singles Seeking a Long Lasting Relationship.” This company promises to shortcut my search to happiness.

Christian online dating services also promise happiness. One of my married Christian friends told me about an ad she had heard for an online Christian dating service. She described it as using “a gag-worthy Cinderella narrative: they met online and fell in love and pretty soon they were celebrating the happiest day of their lives.” She felt this was a dangerous lie to peddle.

Earlier this year Canadian Christian writer and blogger, Sarah Bessey casually ended a tweet with #ThingsOnlyChristianWomenHear. This became a trending hashtag, and the conversation it facilitated – which I return to in chapter three – indicated I wasn’t alone in my discontent with the way some churches were talking about marriage. For example, Twitter user @GodsDesignPerth wrote:

"Bible college? Ah, you mean 'bridal college. Great place to meet a godly man. <wink, wink, nudge, nudge>" #ThingsOnlyChristianWomenHear

(GodsDesignPerth 2017)

Women who used Bessey’s hashtag showed that in their experience, marriage was considered the goal of a Christian woman’s life. Here, church culture risks being out of step with passages in the New Testament which uphold and honour being unmarried, recognising the personal and collective spiritual opportunities afforded to the unmarried. Notably, in 1 Corinthians 7, the Apostle Paul repeatedly states that although it is perfectly acceptable to marry, it is better not to. For example, “To the unmarried and the widows I say that it is good for them to remain single, as I am” (verse 8). Additionally, “he who marries his betrothed does well, and he who refrains from marriage will do even better” (verse 38). This advice is given so that a believer may be focused on “the things of the Lord”, rather than “how to please” their partner (verse 32)<sup>2</sup>.

Even the (overwhelmingly conservative) Sydney Anglican Diocesan report on *Human Sexuality and the ‘same-sex marriage’ Debate* includes a caution against over-privileging

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<sup>2</sup> *English Standard Version*, retrieved from <https://www.biblegateway.com>

marriage. By way of ruling out gay and lesbian unions, this report describes heterosexual marriage as necessary for humans to fully reflect the image of God: “it is *only with* the woman that the man can be God’s image, and it is *only with* the man that the woman can be God’s image. So Again, *to be united in this complementarity is essential for the humanity that God describes as ‘very good’* (Thompson, 2015, p61. Emphasis in original). The writers then add a “postscript for those who are not married” in which they (backtracking somewhat) remind readers it is “wrong to idolise marriage as the only way to live in service of the Lord Jesus. To do this would be to forget the warnings about family from Jesus himself (Matt.10:37)” (pp78-79).

There are tensions, then, within Protestant Evangelical Christianity surrounding discourse on marriage and sexuality. Analysing the presence of the happiness-via-marriage script in this discourse will help sort through these tensions, opening up space to have more constructive conversations around the intersection of faith and sexuality.

## **Context**

Despite Bessey’s accidental trending hashtag, this narrative, is of course, not actually something only Christian women hear. The marriage narrative is a pervasive and memetic cultural narrative which teaches us that the ultimate goal of a woman’s life is to fall in love (with a man) and secure a lifelong monogamous heterosexual relationship, sanctioned by marriage. In this narrative – which I explore in chapter one - the church wedding ceremony typically acts as a border crossing, in which a bride moves from the land of incomplete girlhood to a space of fully formed womanly happy-ever-after. A land of domesticity, mothering, wellness, prosperity and happiness. Leena-Maija Rossi (2011) argues that the two most powerful images of heterosexuality done ‘properly’ are “the ritual of a ‘white’ church wedding” as it “seems especially to fulfil the criteria of ‘happy’ or felicitous performatives” (p12), and “the image of the child” as the child is “represented as the fulfilment of the heterosexual relationship and as a source of social worth for women” (p16). Additionally, Rossi reminds us that “wrongdoers of sexuality at large, be they gays, lesbians, or straight people, do not earn the recognition and acceptance granted to those who aim towards repeating heterosexuality after the norm” (2011, p16). Roxane Gay points out that the narrative has become shared cultural knowledge, saying, we “all know the common fairy tale. There’s a man and a woman – needless to say, we rarely see stories about a woman and a woman or a man and a man – who must overcome some obstacle to reach happily ever after” (2014, p192). According to this narrative, the traditional white church wedding is the happiest day a woman can aim for.

Through Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), I came to understand that the marriage narrative is underwritten by a happiness script; that is, a template or path to follow, directing us towards choices which are deemed good and right, and which supposedly guarantee happiness as the end-point. Ahmed writes that "happiness is attributed to certain objects that circulate as social goods" (2010, p61). The image and event of the wedding day is one such social good. Engagements are met with congratulations, wedding photographs are fawned over, royal weddings are broadcast into our homes<sup>3</sup>, celebrity weddings are visually recreated in magazines, romance stories – both fictional and real – are retold with joy. Consequently, we learn to anticipate and respond to wedding-day oriented narratives with happiness.

Ahmed (2010, 2014) describes this sort of prescribed affective response as social because we learn to share a 'right' emotion in order to be like those around us. When we respond to a wedding, its objects and images, with happiness, "we are aligned; we are facing the right way" (Ahmed, 2010, p61), We know that there is a 'right' or prescribed response, because to feel otherwise isolates us from the shared experience and "we become alienated – out of line with an affective community - when we do not experience pleasure from proximity to objects that are attributed as being good" (p61). The wedding is to be received happily, and responded to favourably. Happiness is both a public sign that a woman has lived her life well, and the reward for living well. Jaclyn Geller (2001) argues that in marriage, "when a girl yokes herself to one man she does so publicly, so that everyone knows she is a bride, a wife, a desirable woman, a popular woman, a good girl, all those things we are supposed to want to be" (p124). Marriage narratives uphold the wedding day as the goal to aim for as it supposedly secures future happiness.

This creates a powerful happiness-via-marriage script, directing us towards marriage, so that we might be happy. Promising happiness can be a way for those with authority or

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<sup>3</sup> Ahmed (2014) notes that in Britain the royal wedding becomes a happiness object which is gifted to the nation. Responding to the engagement of Prince William and Kate Middleton in the 'right' way, that is, happily, became a way of showing that one is rightly aligned with those around them, that one belongs, is a proper citizen, as "to share in the body of the nation requires that you place your happiness in the right things" (2014, p27) and "those who did not participate in this national happiness were certainly positioned as killjoys or 'affect aliens', alienated from the nation by virtue of not being affected in the right way" (p26). The royal wedding is "a time of good cheer; a time for good cheer. It was a celebration of the love of a heterosexual couple (this is a love *we can believe in*, a love we are happy to love). And not just any couple of course, a shiny privileged white couple" (p26).

influence (for example, religious leaders or wedding planners) to encourage others to pursue marriage, for personal happiness. This can distract us from other relationships or life choices. It can also distract us from seeing that encouraging people to marry is in the interest of the authority figure promoting it. The religious leader may seek to foreclose the possibility of same-sex unions, the wedding planner hopes you will spend more money, but both encourage us to choose marriage for our own happiness. In this sense, an idea or promise of happiness becomes a way of regulating behaviour and desire, as we are directed towards marriage.

The wedding day, and the new marriage it institutes, are longed for events not simply because they might be good or desirable in themselves, but because they are deemed necessary, indeed mandatory, for the person who wants to live a happy life. As the image of the wedding that resonates as the wedding done well, is still largely, a church wedding ceremony, the wedding day is also an obvious point for Christianity and Christian teaching on marriage to interact and intersect with cultural marriage narratives.

## **Method and Outline**

I avidly consumed marriage narratives throughout childhood and adolescence, both at church and through fiction. Heterosexual romance and marriage plots are, as Adriene Rich argued, “beamed” at us through “fairy tales, television, films, advertising, popular songs” (2003, p24). However, I came to feel strikingly disconnected with the narrative and the fairy tale promise of ‘happily ever-after’. This disconnect led me to read feminist criticism of marriage and courtship narratives. Through Ahmed, I learned to pair this criticism with critiques of happiness discourse. Ahmed asked us to consider “What does happiness do? ... how is happiness associated with some life choices and not others, how is happiness imagined being as what follows a certain kind of being?” (2010, p2), that we might be able “to make room” (p20) for those who are excluded from normative ideas of happiness. This reading informs this thesis, and is the focus of my first chapter.

Meanwhile, in my lived experience, I was seeing an idea of happiness-via-marriage in Protestant Evangelical teaching, texts and conversations on marriage and sexuality. Surely, these texts also needed to be analysed from the framework provided by Ahmed in *The Promise of Happiness*. In this thesis, I test whether Ahmed’s “sceptical disbelief in happiness as a technique for living well” (2010, p2) can be applied to a different set of texts, and propose moving towards a reparative rereading of Protestant Evangelical texts in order to further the project of making room, of being open to possibility.

Halberstam might be right to claim that, generally speaking, feminist and queer analyses of marriage and gender norms perhaps haven't held Christianity fully to account. Yet even Halberstam then opts to quickly dismiss religious texts and practise. Rather than critically analyse religious texts alongside the vast array of pop cultural texts thoroughly dissected in *GaGa Feminism*, Halberstam simply concludes "religion is a no-no and God has got to go-go" (2012, p28). This is unhelpful for the queer or feminist person who is also religious, and who wishes to acknowledge and celebrate the complexities of their subjectivity. As Janet Jakobsen writes, "it seems one cannot be both gay and religious" but this is "a disjunction that is belied by the lives of many gay persons." (2005, p288). Consequently, I follow what Rosi Braidotti has termed "a post-secular approach" which "makes manifest the previously unacceptable notion that rational agency and political subjectivity, can actually be conveyed through and supported by religious piety, and may even involve significant amounts of spirituality" (2013, p25). In doing so, I seek to respond to Halberstam's criticism of Christianity, without discrediting the lives of those who do not find religion "a no-no".

Currently, my analysis is limited to a small selection of key texts. It is not my intention to declare a conclusive picture of how *all* Protestant Evangelicals think, but to bring a new set of texts to an existing discussion, and to ask what may be learned by questioning how Protestant Evangelicalism intersects with marriage narratives and happiness discourse. By asking the questions Ahmed has taught us to ask, in relation to this small sample of texts, it has become clear that further study of a much broader selection of Protestant Evangelical texts would be beneficial, not merely so that those of faith can better understand themselves, but, because it could help to further develop an inclusive and transformative feminist response to marriage narratives and happiness discourse.

My first chapter is guided by two broad questions: What is the marriage narrative? And how does Ahmed's work on happiness scripts add to our understanding of why the marriage narrative remains popular and pervasive? I answer these questions by focusing on key points of feminist response to marriage narratives, and marriage as institution. Exploring these questions lays the theoretical groundwork for this thesis as I move towards mapping the connections between promises of happiness, the threat of unhappiness, marriage and salvation in Protestant Evangelical discourse.

In chapters two and three, I shift my focus to consider Protestant Evangelical literature and culture. In chapter two, I turn to the tradition of Protestant Evangelical conduct literature,

that is, texts which instruct Christians on how to live their day-to-day lives, particularly with regards to marriage and sexuality. I read *The Meaning of Marriage* by Timothy Keller and *The Marriage Book* by Nicky and Sila Lee as key contemporary examples of this type of literature

In Chapter three, I look at how Christians work with this story to make sense of their lives. I focus on how the inverse script, which threatens unhappiness to those who stray from the path, is also used to regulate desire and sexuality. Following Ludger H. Viefhues-Bailey who used online forums to add “the dimension of user-feedback” allowing us to “see how ordinary users adopt and adapt the message of elite evangelical advice columnists” (2012, p5), I turn to internet based texts – blogs, tweets, “success stories” on Christian dating sites – to ask how the happiness-via-marriage script is used and interpreted within Christian culture.

Throughout this thesis, we will see that Protestant Evangelical texts and culture seek to regulate the right expression of sexuality. Making marriage and domesticity appear appealing by promising happiness to those who live well, and unhappiness to those who deviate from the path of heterosexual marriage, is one method of doing this. However, I don’t want to simply try to prove who is to blame for perpetuating the happiness-via-marriage script; nor do I wish to tell people not to marry or not to attend church. There might be other more creative, productive and liberating responses.

Rather than proving whether this script is predominantly secular or religious, what I want to ask, as I move towards a conclusion in chapter four, is, given this script is appearing in both these places, *what do we do* with the knowledge that the idea of future happiness can function as a regulation device? In asking this question, I follow Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s (2003) work on paranoid and reparative reading. The limitation of paranoid readings is that even if we could know, exclusively and finally, who is at fault, there is no guaranteed response from the reader about how to achieve change. However, reading reparatively may help us to see “the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture – even a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them” (pp150-151). In the case of a happiness-via-marriage script, knowing it exists and can circulate within popular culture *and* Protestant Evangelicalism does not erase it, or necessarily change how we feel about marriage. However, reparatively reading texts which adhere to the script, allows us to reread oppressive and unhappy histories, traditions and texts and find sustenance instead of limitation. In line with Ahmed’s “politics of the hap” which “is about opening up possibilities

for being in other ways” (2010, p223), I imagine that attempting to reparatively reread the Protestant Evangelical tradition will both require, and create, an openness to possibility.

This thesis began from a place of affective dissonance and personal curiosity. As Braidotti writes, “one’s intellectual vision is not a disembodied mental activity, rather it is closely connected to one’s place of enunciation” (1991, p160). Ahmed reminded me of the productive potential of unhappiness, arguing that unhappiness can be a type of “political action” and “a way of saying no” (2010, p207) to prescribed patterns of life. However, Braidotti (2009, 2008) claims that we need more than melancholia, and proposes instead that we “experiment with other ethical relations as a way of producing new forms of resistance” (2008, p10). I keep this in mind as I conclude this thesis, buoyed by the possibility that changing the way we tell stories has creative and transformative potential (Zipes 2016, Halberstam 2012, Frank 2010). Braidotti writes that “we need to learn to think differently about ourselves. To think means to create new concepts” (2009, p45). I hope that we may be able to retell or rethink that which usually appears limiting, to tell different stories of Protestant Evangelicals, their experiences of happiness *and* unhappiness, enabling us – whether we are religious or not – to say ‘no’ to the limitations of the script, and ‘yes’ to possibility.

## Chapter 1. And They lived Happily Ever After

In this chapter, I map key aspects of feminist response to both the marriage narrative and marriage as institution. I then show how Ahmed's work on happiness scripts adds to this body of work by offering an explanation for the continued appeal of the marriage narrative. Following Ahmed, I argue the marriage narrative is underwritten by a happiness script, thereby creating a compelling happiness-via-marriage script. This script works to regulate desire and behaviour by directing us towards marriage and family, as the most, and perhaps only, legitimate source of happiness, meaning and wellbeing. With reference to Slavoj Žižek (2017), I suggest that the wedding (and indeed the happiness-via-marriage script) can be thought of as a social technology, promoted as being necessary for individual happiness, but which is co-opted to promote various ideological, economic and political purposes.

### In the Company of Cinderella<sup>4</sup>

I remember tutoring a young teenager, and discussing the difference between *plot* and *theme*. She was struggling to understand this in relation to her set text, so I suggested we work with a common story, like Cinderella. I asked her to tell me what happens in the story. She gave a comprehensive summary of the girl who is made to do the cleaning, her ugly step sisters, the ball, the fairy godmother, the glass slippers, the prince, the shoe fitting. And, of course, Cinderella and the Prince marrying and living happily ever-after.

"Great, that is the plot" I said. "To think about the theme we might ask, 'what is it about?' Or, 'Are there any take-home messages?'" She thought on it for a minute, and then, without a trace of irony or bitterness, because she was twelve, she said, "be good, work hard, get married."

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<sup>4</sup> I've noticed that Cinderella turns up in this thesis a lot. But then, the happiness-via-marriage script is *her* story. She is, it turns out, a great money maker for Walt Disney Weddings, (yes, they are a thing!). Rebecca Mead (2007) reported that "Cinderella's coach, the rental of which costs twenty-five hundred dollars per ceremony, is one of the most coveted items available through Disney's Fairy Tale Weddings & Honeymoons program" (2007, p68). Cynically, Mead continues, "Whether there is any sense in which a Cinderella-themed wedding can be anything other than juvenile is a good question, but the larger fantasy that it draws on – that every bride on her wedding day is a princess – is a wide spread one" (p72-73). Cinderella perhaps is the image of *happily ever-after*, but she is also the "persecuted heroine who *cannot* take charge of her life and who needs the help of magic powers and men to bring her happiness in the form of marriage" (Zipes, 2011, p180). As we proceed, we would, perhaps, be wise not to forget that.

Writing of the instructive and formative quality of stories, socio-narratologist Arthur Frank argues that:

Stories most evidently teach us what counts as good and bad by linking character's actions to consequences that listeners *feel* are good or bad. Children need not be told explicitly that Cinderella's step mother is acting badly or that Cinderella's marrying the prince is good. Good and bad are embodied feelings experienced before they can be learned as moral principles" (2010, p36).

The happiness-via-marriage script works in this way. We are encouraged to respond to the weddings of others with happiness, and long for our own as the bringer of happiness. In thinking about the obvious places the happiness-via-marriage script is adhered to, we might call to mind classic fairy tales, novels with a romance plot or Hollywood *romcom* films. Halberstam has described the white wedding as "the 'cum shot' of the romantic comedy" (2012, p115). In these types of texts, we learn that for a girl to be a good girl, she should be well behaved, morally virtuous and hardworking, so that she will eventually be rewarded with marriage. This marriage, we are to believe, will secure her a good and happy future, free of the obstacles of the past. Audiences learn to align themselves with the heroine in longing for marriage, as broken or painful childhoods will surely be redeemed through the arrival of the prince, domestic bliss and the promise of happily ever after. Someday, sings Snow White, the prince will come, and how happy that moment will be.

According to the marriage narrative, good girls are rewarded with marriage, and marriage in turn is the start of a new and happy life. The influential Christian minister and writer, Timothy Keller, whose work I focus on in the next chapter, puts it this way, "Marriage has unique power to show us the truth of who we really are. Marriage has a unique power to redeem our past and heal our self-image through love" (2011, p167). Marriage then, is held out, as a goal to aim for. Just as it did for Cinderella, marriage is the event which can redeem or erase the pain, injustices and insecurities of our past, offering a fresh start to life, in which future happiness is supposedly secured. Halberstam (2012) explains that because we continually retell standard romance stories, young girls learn to desire to be the good, popular, married woman, who lives in safe, static, middle class comfort. As a society we, "lead young girls in particular to believe that they will be swept along from one life defining event to another – that love leads to marriage, marriage to babies, babies to family contentment, and that once in the shelter of family, life will be sweet, simple and fulfilling" (Halberstam, 2012, p111). The

wedding, usually a traditional white, church wedding, becomes a powerful symbol of life done the right way up to that point, and it acts as a guarantee that it will continue to go well, or happily, ever-after. The marriage narrative, and the happiness script which underwrites it, close off other ways of being in the world, as they are deemed unhappy and less worthwhile. This is at best limiting, and at worst, oppressive.

### **Opposition to the Marriage Narrative**

Opposition to the marriage narrative, of course, isn't new. It was 1980 when Adrienne Rich wrote of compulsory heterosexuality and lamented that so rarely in the stories we tell is "the question ever raised as to whether, in a different context ... women would *choose* heterosexual coupling and marriage." (2003, p13). Before her, Gayle Rubin called this "obligatory heterosexuality" (1975, p179). Rubin argued that marriage as institution, and the male oriented kinship structures and the exchange of women it has allowed for, is used to organise, regulate and control the sexuality (and lives) of women, directing desire towards the right kind of relationship choices. Compulsory or obligatory heterosexuality makes heterosexual marriage not simply the 'right' choice, it works to erase other choices, so that marriage is the only visible and legitimate option. Compulsory or obligatory heterosexuality directs us to see that the 'right' expression of desire and sexuality is in the roles of husband and wife, and the gendered roles these married identities have been traditionally used to create and uphold. Rubin objected to this, arguing:

Far from being an expression of natural differences, exclusive gender identity is the suppression of natural similarities. It requires repression: in men, of whatever the local version of "feminine" traits; in women, of the local definition of "masculine" traits .... The same social system which oppresses women in its relation of exchange, oppresses everyone in its insistence upon a rigid division of personality. (Rubin, 1975, p180)

Rubin's work taught us that regulating and directing desire into an obligatory heterosexual matrix, where sexuality is ideally expressed within heterosexual marriage, is tied to a notion of rigid prescribed gender roles, which see men and women as inherently different yet complimentary opposites (p178). This is limiting both for men and women, but it effects men and women in an 'asymmetric' (p183) way, as it is women who are passed from father to husband: "If it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the woman being a conduit of a relationship rather than a partner to it" (p174). In an account of the wedding service included in *The Marriage Book* by Nicky and Sila Lee,

we can see how this act of transfer can be rescripted as a blissful, though bittersweet moment. Nicky Lee, a Church of England minister, and leader of *The Marriage Course* at the prominent London Church, Holy Trinity Brompton, reflects, “when I am taking a marriage service, there is one particularly poignant moment: when the father gives me his daughter’s hand for me to pass to the groom” (Lee & Lee, 2007, p206). Lee sees that:

this action symbolises the fact that both sets of parents are letting go of their son or daughter, passing them from the parental hands into each other’s care. It is the culmination of years of responsibility from their child’s conception to their marriage, when a new family unit is formed (Lee & Lee, 2007, p206).

It is important to note the linear life progression Lee implies here; a child progresses from conception to marriage, and marriage signals a new beginning. Also, we begin to see how the cultural marriage narrative can be subtly worked into Protestant Evangelical advice books such as *The Marriage Book*. Additionally, we see that the wedding service can be used to illustrate various, and often competing ideological claims. Scholars such as Rubin direct us to see the exchange of women; Lee hopes it will be read as both a significant moment in a person’s development and the moment in which the parents, “once the most important people in their child’s life, must now for the sake of the marriage take a step back to love and encourage in a new way” (p206). I have no problem with observing that our relationships with our parents will evolve over time; my point is to note how a text which views marriage positively (unsurprisingly) interprets the unhappy history of the institution of marriage in ways that further enshrine marriage and the wedding ceremony as pivotal moments in a person’s life narrative. The wedding becomes a signifier of maturity and happiness, while the unhappy history of an act such as “giving away” a daughter is overlooked.

Jaclyn Geller (2001) has offered a more recent mapping of this less-than-happy social history of marriage as an institution, outlining how marriage has historically been both a source of oppression for women, as well as being the only path possible for a woman to travel should she wish to maintain, or gain, social, moral, and economic respectability and stability. Geller considers that while marriage might once have been a financial necessity for women, today, the significant social and political gains that have been made by women collectively, make “matrimony’s continuing allure” a mystery (2001, p13). Geller takes an active stance against marriage, saying “not all choices are ‘valid’ merely because sane individuals make them”

(p70), and that to this end, we should not accept marriage as valid. Rather, if we align with Geller we would see

that marriage is destructive because it perpetuates negative hierarchical divisions such as the celebration of wives and the accompanying denigration of spinsters, the artificial distinction between good (sexually monogamous) and bad (sexually experimental) girls, the exaltation of conjugal love over platonic friendship and the privileging of institutionalized togetherness over solitude (p70).

Geller comes to this conclusion based on the social history of marriage as an oppressive institution, “tainted by the historical residue of female subordination” (p71). She argues that contemporary weddings cannot escape being part of this history, and that the continued pursuit of this kind of sanctioned togetherness, as the most desirable state, makes other expressions of sexuality, other modes of being in relationship, as well as being alone, seem less valid, less fulfilling and necessarily less happy. We only have to think of the fear that is contained in the common expression “I don’t want to end up sad and alone”, which equates being unmarried with sadness and loneliness rather than allowing a person to see solitude as one potentially rewarding state of being, in a spectrum of possibilities. Being unmarried is a *different* life, with different possibilities, not a less valid one. We should remember that even in the first half of the twentieth century, being unmarried (and necessarily abstaining from heterosexual sex), and perhaps choosing to live with another unmarried woman was “the only status available to women at this historical moment that enables their economic self-determination” as “throughout the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, so-called marriage bars legally prohibited the hiring of married women.” This “made marriage incompatible with middle class work” (Kahan, 2013, p42). Being unmarried allowed single women, the so-called spinster to be “transformed from a being toward family to the new being toward independence” (Kahan, 2013, p43).

The perpetuation of marriage narratives, however, erases the value of other patterns of life. Geller writes that literature such as self-help books and women’s magazines, nearly always presume that:

togetherness is superior to solitude. Romantic evenings out and cosy weekends burrowing at home with one’s consort always take precedence over extended stretches of time alone. In this relationship-biased perspective, the conjugal activities of sex, affection and conversation are inherently superior to reading, writing, thinking and

prayer, activities that require solitude and can only be done properly in the quiet of one's own room, the silence of a library or the peace of a sanctuary. (Geller, 2001, p39)

While I also advocate the productive possibilities of solitude, and acknowledge that we do not always value or enjoy the quiet and personal pursuits of education and spirituality as much as we could, I would prefer to see solitude and togetherness both recognised as equally rich ways of being. Making room for the lives of those who don't follow the heteronormative paths specified by the happiness-via-marriage script shouldn't mean we denigrate the lives and choices of those who do. Leena-Maija Rossi (2011) helpfully reminds us that "taking an analytical look at normatively 'happy' or felicitous performatives of heterosexuality does not, of course mean that heterosexuality should not be reiterated or that people should not reproduce or be happy in their heterosexual relationships" (2011, p17). Making room for those who do not marry, who are child-free, who may not be heterosexual, allowing them (us) to walk through the world in supportive friendships and relationships, experiencing intimacy and belonging, living lives that are recognised as valuable, does not mean that no one should marry, or that those who are married should not seek to build and maintain a joyful marriage.

The necessity to keep relational (and sexual) possibility open is also seen in the context of debates around same-sex marriage and alternative kinship structures, with some key queer theorists arguing that focusing on marriage as a path to social inclusion further invalidates non-married intimacies. Judith Butler reminds us "it is important to mark how the field of intelligible and speakable sexuality is circumscribed so that we can see how options outside of marriage are becoming foreclosed as unthinkable" (2002, p18). Jyl Josephon argues that marriage is never just a public statement of love, but rather it is "public institution that creates a right to private sexual relations, and yet is defined by public policy". Additionally, it is intrinsically tied to ideas of correct and acceptable expression of sexuality, behaviour, and "who should be included as full citizens" (2005, p270). Yet, although citizenship and validation may well contribute to our happiness, for these social goods and legal rights to be accessible only through marriage limits our understanding of acceptable and desirable life outcomes. As Halberstam states, in response to arguments for same-sex marriage in America where access to health care is often cited as a prime motivator, "there is no better way to say it, marriage should not be required in the first place in order for partners and children and dependents to access adequate health care" (2012, p109). I would add that as much as marriage may be a good or useful way to publicly signal one's commitment to their partner, it should not be required for happiness or the sign of life well lived, nor promoted as such, as this necessarily

regulates our desires, choices and behaviour to be directed towards one life outcome, while implying that other relational and sexual choices, including asexuality and periodic or lifelong celibacy will be unhealthy, unfulfilling and unhappy. The wider discussion on opening marriage beyond heterosexual partnering highlights some of the complex ways marriage functions as a signifier of inclusion, worth and respectability, *as well as* a guaranteed path to health and happiness.

Despite sustained feminist and queer critique of marriage itself, and the wide spread popularity of marriage narratives, decades after Rubin and Rich complained of the pervasive and memetic nature of the marriage narrative in popular culture, the narrative remains a perplexingly popular trope. Geller (2001) writes that the sustained appeal of marriage is a mystery, and Heather Love points out that “marriage does not need to deliver on its promise of happiness to keep people coming back for more – fantasies of future happiness will do the job.” (2007, p53). Additionally, “despite a long history of criticism and ample evidence of marriage’s failures, it remains the golden fleece of romantic fulfilment.” (ibid). Halberstam complained that “best-selling books are still telling women how to get men and how to marry them” (2012, p67), while Roxane Gay confessed “I enjoy fairy tales because I need to believe, despite my cynicism, that there is a happy ending for everyone, especially for me” (2014, p192). Something about this fantasy of marriage, as the key to a promised happy future, sticks with us, even if we, like Roxane Gay, are cynical about the reality of such a promise.

### **Promising Happiness: Making Marriage Narratives Appealing and Compelling**

Ahmed’s work on happiness adds an important layer to understanding the memetic nature of marriage narrative, as it provides a clear rationale for its endurance and popularity, despite its inherent sexism. Ahmed argues that the goal, or promise, of future happiness which is attached to marriage and family is what makes the pursuit of marriage and the happy family so compelling. Through Ahmed, we learn that the promise of future happiness creates happiness scripts which direct us toward certain choices, not simply because they are considered right, but because the pursuit and attainment of these things will make us happy. Most of us, like Gay, want or “need to believe” that happiness is in our reach (2014, p192).

A happiness script works to regulate behaviour by “providing a set of instructions for what women and men must do in order to be happy, whereby happiness is what follows being natural or good” (Ahmed, 2010, p59). Claire Colebrook has suggested that “the culture of happiness is a culture of worthiness, moral reward, active autonomy, self-formation, self-

affirmation and narrative intelligibility” (2007, p97). The happiness-via-marriage script tells us happiness can be ours, if we follow the script, and live a ‘normal’ or ‘good’ life, focused on marriage and family.

The idea that happiness is what we will be rewarded with if we choose, desire and behave rightly – that is, if we marry and have a family – allows the marriage narrative to become a compelling script or template for life. More negatively, the threat of unhappiness may deter people from pursuing alternative modes of being (not marrying, not having children), as surely, we all want to live well and be happy. Arthur Frank (2010) argues that storytelling, in general, has the capacity to *do* things, saying the stories we tell and consume can both widen our field of vision and make us more empathetic, or by highlighting only certain narrative outcomes, stories can work to make a “particular perspective not only plausible but compelling.” This can “limit people’s sympathetic imagination” (2010, p32).

Marriage narratives which adhere to the formula set out by the happiness-via-marriage script, have this simultaneously limiting yet compelling effect. Consumers of the narrative learn to desire marriage specifically because it, and the comfortable life it apparently secures, is believed to bring happiness. Happiness comes to signify a wealth of desired life outcomes, such as financial security, an abundance leisure time, wellness, and the love and comfort of a partner and children. All these things will be yours, we are told, if you live well, and core to living well is being married.

Malcolm Brown (2011), an Anglican Priest working within the Church of England, has also explored happiness as a controlling device, criticising it for leading to complacency with the world-as-it-is. Brown suggests that advertisements also employ the image of happily-ever-after, and that this evokes a sense of stasis, implying that change, action and even work, are incongruous with happiness. Brown argues that if we were to believe the aspirational images of the good life presented in glossy magazines and commercial television we (in this case a man) might assume that the good and happy life consists of “a hundred thousand pounds a year, a large modern house with a smart car in the drive, a sweet womanly wife, two children – a boy and a slightly younger girl – and no work. Nothing ever happens in the happy picture” (p75). Happiness in this picture is not simply aligned with normative (upper) middle class existence, but with the absence of work and change; somehow the heterosexual couple at the centre of this image have an income, yet they are pictured as living in one long weekend or holiday. Work was perhaps done in the past, to secure a happily-ever-after, but the dream or

promise, is one where work is absent. Here, happiness operates to keep things as they are, to keep us focused on replicating an ideal of a normal, happy life. Brown's criticism of the promise of a happily-ever-after "in which nothing of significance happens" (p76) is firmly located within a theological analysis. He writes "if the world is understood as incomplete, fallen but redeemable, then to be happy with things as they are, is to risk detaching oneself from God's project" (p76). However, similar criticisms of concepts of happiness which equate the good and happy life with a life of inaction and maintaining the status-quo, could also be made from the standpoint of any progressive or transformative politics.

Recent feminist and queer critiques of happiness highlight that the desire to replicate normative patterns of life is a political consequence of promoting static, normative pictures and ideas of happiness. In response to the rise of queer liberalism Heather Love has said:

the heteronormative institution that is most bolstered by the new homonormativity is marriage. By gaining access to this institution that has been defined by excluding them, gays and lesbians may finally upgrade their 'virtually normal' status to *actually* normal. ... Same sex marriage would be easier to dismiss if it simply promised to make us like everyone else – the problem is, it also promises to make us happy. (2007, p53).

Suzanne Clisby (2017) charts the political consequences of happiness, demonstrating how particular gendered forms of happiness direct subjects towards normative models of being in the world. Victoria Robinson (2017) challenges the idea that all iterations of heterosexuality are the same, and that the links between heterosexuality and happiness (or unhappiness) are static. Robinson argues that inclusive feminist politics must recognise the legitimacy and variety of heterosexual relationships experienced by women, as it is "in recognizing a diversity of heterosexual experiences [that] a more inclusive feminist politics which might speak to a wider group of women than previously is made possible" (2017, p16).

Robinson works with Ahmed's argument that the promissory nature of normative happiness locates happiness in the lives of privileged subjects who follow normative gendered and sexual scripts which focus on marriage, family, heterosexuality and wealth accumulation (2017, p13). Importantly, Robinson points out that there can be a conceptual slide between 'happiness' and 'well-being', and suggests that "the 'happiness turn' can be seen to be reflected and created in self-help literature that promises happiness can be obtained through individual effort, and increasingly in government policies, where well-being and happiness are inextricably linked, and used as a performance indicator to illustrate economic growth and

progress” (2017, p14). In the following chapters, I shift my analysis to Protestant Evangelical texts, and consider how ideas of happiness, health and worthiness also blend with concepts of salvation and blessing.

### **The Wedding Day: The Happiest Day of Your Life**

For those who cleave to the notion of happiness-via-marriage, getting the wedding ceremony right is of extreme importance. Rebecca Mead (2007) suggests that there are both short and long-term promises attached to the planning of a perfect wedding, both of which are relentlessly promoted by wedding industry professionals. The “immediate promise” of the wedding day, “is that of being the girl in the big white dress at the centre of everyone’s attention” (p19), but a wedding done properly of course promises more than being the centre of attention, it signals that you are the princess or heroine of your own life narrative, that you have done well and that you will continue to do so.

Keeping in mind that marriage narratives dictate that the wedding is the culmination of woman’s life, all of her wedding oriented purchases contribute to a project of self-improvement. Getting these purchases right will bring the bride ever closer to inheriting the promised emotional goods attached to the wedding day: fulfilment, purpose, and the start of happily ever-after. Mead argues that:

the transition undergone by the contemporary young woman marrying for the first time is, in fundamental ways, much less significant than that experienced by her forebears: Her life as a wife may not be very different from her life pre-engagement, in practical terms. But the passage that is passed in the imagination can be profound, and it is upon a bride’s expectations of the impending transformation of her inward self, to become accomplished through the outward accumulation of stuff, that the bridal media work (2007, p22).

We learn through Mead’s work that in the absence of obvious religious or parental guidance or pressure to live and marry in certain approved ways, the wedding industry has become a predominant authority promoting and upholding the happiness-via-marriage script. By popularising and commercialising the notion that the wedding is necessary for ensuring future happiness, wedding industry professionals and service providers serve their own economic ends, while continuing to sell the myth of happiness-via-marriage.

It might be useful to consider Slavoj Žižek's (2017) recent article highlighting the fact that although new technologies are initially marketed on the basis of how they will increase wellness and health outcomes, these technologies end up serving the economic and ideological needs of the corporations, authorities or governments that control them, even if they still serve their initial purpose<sup>5</sup>. Obviously, weddings aren't *new*, yet if we think of the wedding as a social technology, serving different political, economic or theological interests in different ages, we can see that promising happiness is a way of distracting us from those interests. Žižek's analysis that "every technological innovation is always first presented like this, emphasising its health or humanitarian benefits which function to blind us to the more ominous implications and consequences" (2017, n.p) still rings true when applied to weddings. While we are told marriage will make us happier and healthier, many organisations (churches, wedding planners, photographers etc) benefit greatly from our continued interest in weddings.

While it is not controversial to acknowledge that historically weddings have been used to serve the needs of patriarchal societies, work such as Ahmed's teaches us to interrogate how a promise of happiness is used to divert our attention from these ideological causes. Mead argues that the product wedding industry professionals are most invested in selling is the belief that having the right wedding (read: most expensive) is of utmost importance to a person's prospects for living a happy, content, successful and fulfilled life. Narratives which turn the quest for marriage into "the great female adventure" (Rich, 2003, p31) use the promise of happiness to erase or water down the history of the institution as a prime vehicle for controlling women's lives and sexuality. A wedding then, is never just the legal joining of two people who love each other. While it is the legal recognition and registering of a relationship, it also serves other purposes. We should perhaps think of weddings as a social technology that always support some other political or ideological interest. Additionally, the promise of happiness-via-marriage is used to mask this political and ideological interest. In the next chapter, we will see how it can be used in Protestant Evangelical teaching on sexuality and marriage.

### **A promiscuous script**

Arthur Frank (2010) argues that stories are unstable referents, that are not always loyal to those who first tell them. Frank claims that "once a story is told, those who have received it

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<sup>5</sup> I want to acknowledge my friend, Daniel Fleming, whose insightful article 'Can We Trust the Markets When It Comes to The End of Life' (<http://www.abc.net.au/religion/articles/2017/06/15/4685997.htm>) directed me to Žižek (2017) 'Only a New Universalism Can Save us from the New World Order'.

have it as theirs and will use it as they will, with the story lending itself to each of these uses, but also shaping each of these uses” (p34). Remember that Nicky Lee read the act of ‘giving away’ a bride in a significantly different way to Rubin. We should see that no person or community has ownership of the happiness-via-marriage script. It can be employed to serve different ideological and political ends.

Currently in Australia, we are seeing this in the way in which the narrative of the wedding day as a gateway to happiness, both for individuals and societies, is used by both religious or political conservatives in their defence of hetero marriage, and religious progressives and LGBTIQ+ activists who seek to broaden the institution. Bishop Michael Stead, in his polemic against same-sex marriage writes that “faithfulness is a good thing. Enduring together is a good thing. And a partnership between people of the opposite sex is a good thing. We should not tear apart a good thing that God has put together.” He continues, “God gave marriage to men and women, for their own good, for the good of children and for the good of human society” (2016, p1). Similarly, the *Until We All Belong* campaign also believes marriage is good for human flourishing and uses this to make a case for same-sex marriage, arguing, “marriage is a fundamental part of belonging” (<https://untilweallbelong.com>). The happiness-via-marriage script is here used specifically to argue for same-sex marriage as a pathway to social inclusion.

Some theorists, such as Heather White (2015) and Janet Jakobsen (2005) argue that this capability of cultural narratives about marriage and happiness to be adapted to suit both secular and religious causes, should remind us that a belief or “an idea about sexuality as core to identity and fundamental to human wellbeing” (White, 2015, p10) is a cultural inheritance of the Protestant Reformation which informs both religious and secular arguments around same-sex marriage. Jakobsen (2005) argues this at length, reminding us that before the Reformation, although “marriage was long the norm ... it was not the ideal of sexual morality within the Christian societies” (p293). The ideal was monastic celibacy. After the Reformation, with the growth of the Protestant church, and the emergent field of Protestant conduct literature, the norm and the ideal conflate: marriage becomes not only the normal relational state, it becomes a church-sanctioned way to express sexuality, and an ideal state of being in the world.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout this chapter we have seen that much critical attention has been given to marriage narrative and happiness scripts. By reflecting on some of the ways the happiness-via-

marriage script can be adapted to suit different interest groups to legitimise various political and religious causes, we begin to see the ways in which it interacts with Protestant Evangelical discourse.

The promise of future happiness regulates behaviour as it encourages us to align with whoever is promoting marriage as necessary for happiness, health, validation or inclusion. The promise of happiness can make it harder to see the ideological, religious and economic reasons an individual, community or organisation may have for promoting marriage. Instead, employing a promise of happiness allows wedding and marriage promoters – be they wedding industry professionals, religious leaders or LGBTIQ+ activists – to make the claim that we ought to be married for our own good, for our own health and wellness, for financial stability, in short, for our happiness. This invalidates all forms of living life that are not directed towards marriage, as whenever we use a promise of happiness there is always a threat of unhappiness, loneliness and deficiency for those who live otherwise.

One of Ahmed's key goals in her analysis of how the promise of happiness operates to regulate desire was to "make room for life, to make room for possibility" (2010, p20). Ahmed did this through an analysis of film and literature which allowed her to "explore happy families from the point of view of those who are alienated from its promise" (2010, p49). I pick up this project of making room to live outside the template set forth by the happiness-via-marriage script by following some of the ways it appears in a different set of texts. I now turn my attention to Protestant Evangelical teaching on marriage and ask what the promise of future happiness is doing in this discourse.

## Chapter 2. Happiness in Protestant Evangelical Publications on Marriage

*“The Message of this multimillion dollar publishing industry is clear: evangelical Christians have the best sex. And the reason is simple. According to the authors, evangelicals understand that God created men and women to sexually enjoy each other’s bodies within the sanctity of marriage and the most effective way to do that is to clearly understand the ‘natural’ differences between male and female sexual desires.”*

*-Amy DeRogatis<sup>6</sup>*

*“Remember, this person is utterly unlike you. He acts differently, thinks differently, operates differently... at a deeper level, you’re finding out who you really are. You’re seeing him as your other half. You see how God is completing you in your husband. The result of the completion is personal ease. Adam and Eve were naked and unashamed with each other before the fall...there was a sense of a primordial, ancient unity and accord that Adam and Eve had then that we’ve not experienced since, because sin entered and disrupted the unity that we had. When you see marriage as completion, submission finds its place.”*

*-Kathy Keller<sup>7</sup>*

In the previous chapter, I explored how happiness is used as way of regulating behaviour in accordance with the ideological or economic interests of the individual or community promoting marriage as a necessary way of being in the world. In this chapter, I consider how a promise of happiness lends legitimacy to religious instruction in Protestant Evangelical publications on marriage and sexuality. I do this by reading *The Meaning of Marriage*, by influential preacher and author, Timothy Keller (with one chapter authored by his wife, Kathy Keller), and *The Marriage Book*, by Nicky and Sila Lee, founding leaders of Holy Trinity Brompton’s Marriage Course. These texts are key examples of contemporary Protestant Evangelical teaching on marriage, and they have been chosen due to the reach and influence of the authors, and the churches they are associated with.<sup>8</sup> I read them as case studies

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<sup>6</sup> DeRogatis, A (2005). What Would Jesus Do? Sexuality and Salvation in Protestant Evangelical Sex Manuals, 1950s to the present. In *Church History* 74 (1), 112.

<sup>7</sup> Keller K, (2011). Embracing the Other. In Keller T (2011) *The Meaning of Marriage*. p 189-90

<sup>8</sup> Timothy Keller is the founder of Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York. Keller has written many books designed to encourage right Christian living: a quick product search on “Tim Keller” on the website for Sydney Christian bookstore, Koorong, brings up 38 entries, with books offering instruction on a range of topics of relevance to the Christian worshipper/shopper: how to pray, how to preach, how to read the bible and how to

to test whether, as in popular culture, these types of texts also use an idea of happiness-via-marriage to regulate desire and behaviour. This is not, therefore, a conclusive study, but a starting point for future work on the interaction between Protestant Evangelicalism and happiness discourse.

I begin this chapter by considering the role of Protestant conduct literature in shaping and regulating Christian subjectivity and sexual expression. I situate *The Meaning of Marriage* and *The Marriage Book* within this literature. I argue that as these texts are concerned with the right expression of sexuality and Christianity, that marriage and faith are interwoven in problematic ways<sup>9</sup>. Following Amy DeRogatis (2005) who, in her in-depth study of what she terms ‘Protestant Evangelical Sex Manuals’, suggests that “although evangelicals purport to stand at a critical distance from ‘worldly’ secular culture, they do not refrain from adopting the tools of culture to have their message heard” (p5), I then suggest that the authors of these texts use extra-scriptural ideas, namely, a promise of happiness, to legitimate their claims. The authors, particularly Keller, draw on cultural assumptions and studies which link increased health and happiness to marriage. This allows the promise of happiness to function as method of regulating desire and behaviour. Additionally, a conceptual slide between promising salvation and promising happiness can occur. This, in turn, adds weight to the happiness-via-marriage script in Protestant Evangelical culture.

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structure individual devotional or prayer time. Nicky and Sila Lee began *The Marriage Course* at Holy Trinity Brompton, London in 1996. Holy Trinity Brompton runs the course three times a year, and the course materials are used by churches around the world. *The Marriage Book*, was first published four years after Lee and Lee began leading *The Marriage Course*. It was reprinted annually between 2002 and 2005, and has now been released as an e-book.

<sup>9</sup>I do not mean for this to be a theological discussion of marriage as sacrament. Given that I do not write as a theologian, and that neither Keller or Lee and Lee dwell on the theological concept of sacrament, or use this terminology, it is not my goal to question or challenge an understanding of (marriage as) sacrament. Rather I consider how ideas of marriage, (un)happiness and salvation merge and circulate within Christian discourse and culture. With regards to marriage as sacrament within the Protestant tradition, Megan DeFranza writes “marriage provides a means of sanctification, particularly of human sexual desire” (2016, p95) and Stephen Holmes, drawing on Augustine, describes marriage as “a school in which our desires are reordered” (2016, p172). I do not question that a Christian person’s faith *may* be refined through the experience of marriage, but focus on a related, and more problematic, suggestion that marriage is *necessary* for salvation or sanctification, thereby implying the unmarried believer has deficient or dubious faith and character. For example, as Holmes also reminds us, Protestant Christians have “looked askance at ministerial candidates who were not married” (2016, p183).

## Protestant Evangelical Conduct Literature

Romance novels and Protestant conduct literature may seem to have little in common, but an idea of happiness-via-marriage appears in both these literary spaces. Marriage narratives and happiness scripts which teach that an individual can best find happiness in marriage mesh well with Protestant ideals. A possible explanation for this is that Protestant Christianity, as opposed to Catholic Christianity, privileges the individual and marriage. Janet Jakobsen (2005) suggests the Reformation was not just a religious revolution, it was also a sexual revolution:

One of the major changes instituted through the Reformation was a shift in the ethical ideal for sexual life ... the Reformers, most notably Luther and Calvin, denounced celibacy as part of what they depicted as the Church's perversion of the Gospel and encouraged marriage as the ideal of even the most religious life. ... this was a major shift in Christian understandings of the ideal of sexual relations (p292).

Jakobsen suggests "the shift to marriage is also a shift from communalism to individualism" and "the switch to marriage as both norm and ideal, then, is part of the production of the modern individual" (2005, p294). This shift in thought, which promoted marriage, and made clergy "free to marry" (p294) was importantly twinned with the need for regulation; "marriage becomes the only expression of sexual freedom" (p294). Geller writes that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century "A growing, Protestant middle class re-envisioned wedlock as a complimentary but unequal friendship" and that "a stream of conduct books and novels – similar publications continue to the present day – suggested that women were naturally suited for this new model of wedlock, instructing them in domestic arts and celebrating their wifely capacities" (2001, p24). That is, after the Reformation, Protestant advise and conduct literature, *and* romance literature centred around marriage and courtship narratives concurrently emerge and gain popularity. Recalling Adrienne Rich's claim that one reason women seek marriage is "because heterosexual romance has been represented as the great female adventure, duty, and fulfillment" (2003, p31), we can consider the co-emergence of marriage plot focused novels and Protestant conduct literature as demonstrating the effectiveness of the happiness-via-marriage script as a mode of instructing women to desire the right kind of relationships (heterosexual and married), considering it the best possible path for one's own fulfillment and happiness.

Protestant Evangelical literature on sex and marriage is equally about the right expression of Protestant Evangelical Christian faith, as it is about the right expression of

sexuality. Ludger H. Viefhues-Bailey (2012) has argued that the continued “proliferation of Christian advice products is part of the modernization of Evangelical heterosex discourse by creating a specific marketable and consumable identity of Christian sexuality” (p6). Texts such as Keller’s, and Lee and Lee’s should be read as belonging to this discourse, and as contributing to the Christian subject formation, particularly with regards to what is considered the right expression of sexuality, and gendered expressions of self.

DeRogatis (2005) notes that within this discourse, authors typically claim the bible as their authoritative text on marriage and sexuality. Additionally, they are generally:

committed to larger theological and social issues of *sola scriptura*, defining themselves against other Christian and secular approaches to sex, and witnessing that long term sexual satisfaction is only possible when the bible and the protestant Christ are also in the marriage (p99).

Both our sample texts illustrate this. Keller writes that “the gospel of Jesus and marriage explain one another” and claims that to have a successful marriage, “you need to know the secret, the gospel, and how it gives you both the power and pattern for your marriage” (2011, p47). Likewise, Lee and Lee write:

On our wedding day, the two strands of our separate lives are knotted together ... but how can they be held in harmony without unravelling, fraying or even breaking? ... we believe that the only certain answer lies outside ourselves: ‘A cord of three strands is not easily broken’ says the writer of Ecclesiastes ... there is a third strand, a third person in the relationship. This is Jesus Christ, who nourishes the marriage from its core, so that we need not lean on human will power alone (2001, p288)

Like secular marriage narratives, these texts depict marriage as a good goal to desire, and acknowledge sexuality as good. However, in Protestant Evangelical literature both are also considered as gifts from God; “marriage is designed by God to be a relationship in which a man and woman give themselves to each other in radical and total abandonment” (Lee & Lee, 2007, p11). They suggest that a good and happy marriage is only possible if you are a Christian. Therefore, it is possible for the Christian to learn an inverse idea, that is, if you do not have a good and happy marriage, maybe you’re not really a Christian. This is an idea I will return to in the next chapter when I consider how a threat of unhappiness can steer Christian subjects away from sexual expression outside the bounds of heterosexual marriage.

Interestingly, while Lee and Lee introduce their book as containing “practical guidelines for making a relationship not only work but flourish” (2007, p9), Keller seeks to distance his text from Christian literature offering practical advice on how to be married, and claims his:

primary goal is to give both married and unmarried people a vision for what marriage is according to the bible. That will help married people correct mistaken views that might be harming their marriage (p12).

This goal, to “correct mistaken views” on marriage and replace them with a “Biblical perspective on marriage” (p14), however, does include instructing married and un-married people about how to view marriage and how to direct their desire, behaviour and relationships. Significantly, this corrective goal is immediately tied to a pursuit of happiness. Keller argues that,

the Bible’s teaching on marriage does not merely reflect the perspective of any culture or time. The teachings of Scripture challenge our contemporary Western culture’s narrative of individual freedom as the only way to be happy. At the same time, it critiques how traditional cultures perceive the unmarried adult to be less than a fully formed human being (p16)

This may well be true, that there are multiple ways to be happy (and indeed, I hope it is true), but overwhelmingly, Keller’s text can be read as maintaining marriage as the event which will bring happiness. Even in the one chapter of the text which focuses on ‘singleness’, and attempts to uphold the “goodness of singleness” (pp194-197), Keller quickly reverts to promoting the “goodness of seeking marriage” (pp201 – 204).

Jakobsen (2005) has linked the contemporary understanding of seeking marriage as good, and of sexuality as healthy and core to identity, directly to a culturally inherited Protestant legacy. She suggests that, as opposed to Catholicism, “Protestant freedom is an incitement to sexuality over against the celibacy of priestly and monastic life, and it is an incitement specifically to matrimonial and reproductive sexuality” (2005, p294). Jacklyn Geller also writes that the “protestant reformers ... discarded the Catholic idea of clerical celibacy as a superior way of life” (2001, p23) and Benjamin Kahan, following this tradition through to the twentieth century notes that “by the late 1920s sexual happiness rather than just spiritual union was an expectation for married life, and celibacy was vilified as unhealthy and unnatural” (2013, p23). Keller acknowledges that “the Christian church in the West,

unfortunately, does not seem to have maintained its grasp on the goodness of singleness” (2011, p196), but doesn’t seem to offer a reason for why this might be. It is striking that only two pages later Keller goes so far as to link being unmarried yet desiring marriage with both sickness and an inadequate experience of faith, writing “If single Christians don’t develop a deeply fulfilling love relationship with Jesus, they will put too much pressure on their *dream* of marriage, and that will create pathology in their lives” (p98). One of Keller’s stated goals in writing *The Meaning of Marriage* is to “help single people stop destructively over-desiring marriage or destructively dismissing marriage altogether” (p12). We should note that despite lamenting the fact that church does not value singleness as it once did, Keller seems unable to even envisage a healthy (or happy) unmarried person.

Lee and Lee (2007) are more generous to the unmarried reader, concluding their book by affirming that it is “better by far to be single and independent ... than to suffer the consequences of an ill-chosen husband or wife” (p296). However, they still assume that we all want to be married (or partnered). They write, “there is the deep desire within us for someone with whom we can be totally open and honest emotionally, spiritually and physically”, and marriage is the ideal (and only) place for this intimacy. Additionally, marriage will fulfil our emotional, spiritual and physical needs. I acknowledge that Lee and Lee don’t say exactly that marriage will make you happy, however, if the reader has grown up following the happiness-via-marriage script, this picture of fulfilment certainly looks like happiness, specifically happiness secured through marriage. Arguably, Lee and Lee are aware that their reader may well conflate happiness with romance and marriage. They know that:

we grow up believing in a romantic myth: if Cinderella happens to meet her Prince Charming, they will live happily ever after. Should friction arise and we fall out of love, then, the myth states, we have married the wrong person and are destined to live unhappily ever after or get divorced. This message is reinforced for adults through love songs, books and films. Underlying this pervasive and dangerous myth is the belief that real love is something that happens *to* us, over which we have little control” (Lee & Lee, 2001, p 21)

It is perhaps not surprising then that Lee and Lee later describe a lasting marriage as an ultimate achievement, arguing that “For many people, the most significant achievement of their lives will be the building of a loving marriage” (p286). Thankfully, this at least moves from the idea of the wedding day as *guaranteeing* happiness, yet it still suggests that as a goal, or

narrative end point, a good, lasting and presumably happy marriage is what we should work towards. These two Protestant Evangelical books on marriage are, perhaps, not so removed from cultural marriage narratives as the writers might like to think.

### **Marriage and Salvation**

Protestant Evangelical teaching on marriage is not only about how to rightly express one's sexuality, it is also, crucially, about how to express one's faith. In this discourse, marriage and faith are interwoven. Heather White argues that "Christian experts on sexuality" have "inspired a gradual sexual reformation in churches which prized sexual health and normalcy as an expression of actualised spirituality" (White, 2015, p5) and Amy DeRogatis (2005), argues that these texts are about how (married) sexual expression acts as a sign of faith and salvation. Jakobsen (2005) writes that "sexual relations, and marriage in particular, come to epitomize the Protestant ordering of the world", and importantly,

sex, like the commodity, is fetishized in modernity; it replaces food as the sin extraordinaire, the sign of gluttony and dissolution, and it also replaces the vows of poverty and obedience as the sign of right relation to both God and community. Sex becomes the premier site of morality (p297).

There is, therefore, always a threat or suspicion that the unmarried Christian is somehow less blessed, less holy and, presumably, sexually deviant.

DeRogatis suggests that according to Protestant Evangelical marriage manuals, the right enactment or performance of sexuality becomes a visible sign of salvation and God's blessing and love for the Christian subject, indeed, married sex, can be "salvific" (2005, p99). This linking of right theology with right expression of sexuality (i.e. heterosexual marriage), Christian identity and salvation is also expressed in the Sydney Diocesan report on *Human Sexuality*. For example, the authors state that:

Christians must define marriage theologically – as an image of Christ and the church. In light of this, the necessity of marriage complementarity between a man and a woman includes but exceeds the production of children. It includes but exceeds the physical and cognitive needs of men and women. The marriage relationship of the man and the woman includes but exceeds an analogy for the state of the covenant relationship between God and his people in the history of salvation. The union of a man and a

woman is a profound testimony to the father's saving activity in the Son and through the spirit" (Thompson, 2015, p77).

Similarly, in their chapter, 'Sex – what is it all about?' Lee and Lee reflect on poetry in the Old Testament book, The Song of Songs, and write, "because of the power of sex to create pleasure and intimacy, the passionate sexual imagery of the Song of Songs is also used as a metaphor for the close relationship God desires to have with us (2007, p240). Keller goes as far as to say that "Marriage has unique power to show us the truth of who we really are. Marriage has unique power to redeem our past ... And marriage has unique power to show us the grace of what God did for us in Jesus Christ" (2011, p167).

We have seen that for the unmarried reader of Keller's book, remaining single doesn't suffice as a narrative end-point, or as a fulfilling way of being in the world. This text also directs or regulates the desire and behaviour of the unmarried Christian by linking right and happy expression of Christian identity with right expression of (married) sexuality. Keller says an unmarried Christian should change the way they desire marriage (not to stop desiring it), and learn that the Bible's "high view of marriage tells us that marriage, therefore is penultimate. It points us to the Real Marriage<sup>10</sup> that our souls need" (p198). Those who are unmarried should imagine marriage as a means of becoming a better Christian subject:

"how different seeking marriage would be if ...we were to view marriage as a vehicle for spouses helping each other become their glorious future-selves ...marriage eventually does provide unbelievable personal fulfilment, but not in the sacrifice-free and superficial way contemporary people want it to come. Instead, it gives the unique, breathtaking fulfilment of visible character growth... into love, peace, joy and hope." (p203)

Though Keller seeks to dispel what he sees as wrong cultural assumptions about marriage (either aversion to marriage or too high an expectation), his text teaches that as a goal for one's life, as a means of character building and finding happiness, marriage is a very close second to salvation. Indeed, so close, that a happy marriage becomes a sign of salvation. It therefore both draws on *and* upholds the cultural happiness-via-marriage script. Conflating the right expression of gender and sexuality with the right expression of faith and therefore, a sign of

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<sup>10</sup> 'Real Marriage' in this context is, presumably, salvation and/or a relationship with God.

salvation, reveals how high the stakes are for Protestant Evangelicals when it comes to regulating desire, behaviour and sexuality.

### **The Claim of Scripture Alone**

It is assumed that Protestant Evangelical discourse on sex and marriage rests on biblical or scriptural imperative alone. I argue, though, that it also relies on, and upholds, a happiness-via-marriage script. Accordingly, in these texts, happiness operates as a reward for those who desire and behave in the right way. While I agree with DeRogatis' assessment that these texts are theologically committed to the inerrancy and universal applicability of the Bible, promoting what they call a "biblical" view of marriage, it is important to note that these texts, in fact, do not always rely on scripture alone. Rather, as in popular culture, the promise of happiness, which can be thought of as signifying a broader sense of physical, emotional and spiritual health and wellbeing, is used in these texts to make these norms and scriptural imperatives appear appealing and compelling. Here, I explore this claim through analysis of *The Meaning of Marriage*.

Throughout *The Meaning of Marriage*, it is clear that although Keller claims to use the Bible as his authoritative source on marriage<sup>11</sup>, extra-scriptural ideas and resources are drawn on to add legitimacy to his arguments. Keller seeks to promote a "biblical understanding of marriage" (p22), and wants his readers to see marriage as originating from within Christianity. He claims that "marriage did not evolve in the late Bronze age as a way to determine property rights ... Marriage is God's idea" (p13). However, he also relies on cultural discourse to support his claims on the goodness of marriage. Keller refers to Gallup surveys and the National Marriage Project to provide evidence of the "surprising goodness of marriage" (p23-24). Referring to *the State of Our Unions 2002* and *2009* reports, Keller argues against cohabitation before marriage and writes that though "it is true that 45 percent of marriages end in divorce, by far the greatest percentage of divorce happen to those who marry before the age of eighteen, who have dropped out of high school, and who have had a baby together before marrying" (p23). Then, quoting from *The State of our Unions 2009*; "so if you are a reasonably well-educated person with a decent income, come from an intact family and are religious, and marry after twenty-five, without having a baby first, your chances of divorce are low indeed" (Wilcox,

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<sup>11</sup> Keller writes "the substance of this book draws on St. Paul's great passage on marriage in Ephesians 5, not only because it is so rich and full in itself, but because it connects and expounds on the other most important Biblical text on marriage, Genesis 2" (2011, p15)

2009, p80, in Keller, p23-24). We should not gloss over the fact that the writers of *The State of Our Unions* have elsewhere declared they have a “marriage agenda” (2012, p11), and that their goal is to see marriage promoted and renewed in America, through the work of political and community leaders. Nor should we ignore the fact that the person who is depicted here as being made happy by a long-lasting marriage is someone who already has many resources in which to find happiness and to fall back on in times of need: education, family support, financial and emotional stability. Ahmed has reflected that, “The face of happiness ... looks rather like the face of privilege. Rather than assuming happiness is simply found in ‘happy persons’, we can consider how claims to happiness make certain forms of personhood valuable” (Ahmed, 2010, p11). In drawing on surveys which promote marriage as a means of increasing happiness and financial security, Keller makes a case for marriage which is not based purely on scriptural authority. Rather than offer an argument grounded exclusively in scriptural exegesis, Keller defends his case for marriage by arguing that “married people experience greater physical and mental health” and that “marriage provides a profound ‘shock absorber’ that helps you navigate disappointments, illnesses and other difficulties” (p24). The promise of happiness, of increased health, wealth and wellness, is here used to privilege both marriage and heteronormative nuclear families.

### **Biblical Marriage**

I want to take a brief detour to reflect on the idea of “biblical” marriage. This will, however, bring us back to a consideration of the promotion of marriage in Protestant Evangelical discourse as necessary for happiness, remembering that happiness encompasses health, wellness, and in a Christian context, godliness and holiness.

To talk of “the biblical understanding of marriage” as Keller does (2011, p22), or of marriage as “the ideal God-given basis for family life” (Lee & Lee, 2007, p 11), can be a way of regulating gendered behaviour, and promoting a particular understanding of the ideal family through a vague appeal to scripture. For instance, Sydney Anglican minister and historian, Michael Jensen writes that “the biblical pattern of marriage in terms of husbandly sacrificial love and the wifely response of submission is ... an emblem of the gospel of Jesus Christ” (2012, p 137). Keller claims a biblical view based on a “straightforward reading of Biblical texts”, which “means defining marriage as a lifelong, monogamous relationship between a man and a woman” (2011, p16), thereby foreclosing any discussion of same-sex marriage.

Claiming a “biblical” view or “straightforward reading” is not necessarily to be neutral or free of theological or ideological interest. Contrary to Keller, Richard Rambus (2011), who I will return to in my concluding chapter, argues that the New Testament may not be the best place to find examples of nuclear family and instead uses New Testament accounts to explore alternative ways of understanding kinship. Theologian Megan DeFranza (2016), has questioned the use of equating “biblical” marriage with contemporary hetero marriage, pointing out that the most defining feature of marriages depicted in the Bible is that they are “patriarchal”:

Patriarchal marriage, the union of an inferior person to one who is superior and to whom one owes obedience, is much more suited to illustrate the relationship of the church to Christ than contemporary heterosexual marriage. ... “Biblical marriage” was heterosexual, but it was also patriarchal ... Patriarchal marriage is the basis for the theological metaphor illustrating the relationship between God and God’s people, not contemporary Christian marriage supported as it is by equal education and modern law. (DeFranza, 2016, p89)

This is not to deny the centrality of the image of the wedding, or the significance of marriage in Christian theology. DeFranza’s point is to suggest that the marriages depicted in the Bible cannot be uncritically read as a pattern for contemporary marriage, or as necessarily erasing the possibility of same-sex marriage. DeFranza maintains that:

contemporary Christian marriage is not “biblical marriage” of the Old or New Testament. The biblical teaching of the image of God in all people has come to supersede ancient patterns of marriage. The question before Christians today is whether “biblical marriage” can be revised *yet again* to better honour the humanity of gay, lesbian, and bisexual people and the biblical truth that they too are made in the image of God and equally capable of ordering their relationships and sexual lives in ways that honour God, benefit the common good, and promote their own growth in health and holiness (DeFranza, 2016, p90).

Here, although DeFranza is in complete disagreement with Keller about who should be able to marry, and advocates that marriage ought to be widened to be inclusive of LGBTIQ+ relationships, her argument also relies both on a scriptural imperative (that people identifying as LGBTIQ+ are made in the image of God) *and* an idea that marriage will promote “growth in health and holiness” for queer Christians, as it presumably does for straight Christians. There

are two things then that we can observe here. Firstly, recalling Arthur Frank who argued that “As often as stories are conscripted to advance some cause, they do that work for a while, and then turn against those who conscripted them. They can always be told to a different effect” (2010, p35), we are reminded that the happiness-via-marriage script can be used to advocate different and opposing ideas of marriage. This is evidenced in the fact that both Keller and DeFranza use the promise of health and happiness to promote marriage, *and* their understanding of what the bible teaches about sexuality. Keller uses the script to legitimate a view of marriage which is strictly heterosexual, whereas DeFranza, in line with secular LGBTIQ+ activists, uses it to argue for widening the definition of marriage. Secondly, we should note that the use of happiness to make one’s ideology appear appealing and compelling can be employed by both conservative and liberal theologians, and that neither, in this case, are building an argument purely on scriptural imperative. Marriage is depicted, both by Keller and DeFranza, as necessary for the Christian subject to be happy, to be healthy and holy, to be complete. Consequently, marriage is not promoted or defended solely on the basis of biblical or scriptural command, but because it promises happiness.

### **Employing Happiness to Regulate Behaviour**

As we have seen, marriage, happiness and salvation can be closely linked in Protestant Evangelical discourse. Promising happiness as a method of regulating desire and behaviour is particularly effective within this discourse, as a conceptual slide between salvation and happiness can occur. Keller invokes a promise of future happiness to encourage certain behaviour within marriage, when he argues that right behaviour in marriage has the potential to bring great happiness. He writes:

“The deep happiness that marriage can bring, then, lies on the far side of sacrificial service in the power of the spirit. That is, you only discover your own happiness after each of you has put the happiness of your spouse ahead of your own in a sustained way, in response to what Jesus has done for you. Some will ask, ‘if I put the happiness of my spouse ahead of my own needs – then what do *I* get out of it?’ The answer is – happiness. That is what you get, but a happiness through serving others instead of using them, a happiness that won’t be bad for you.” (Keller, 2011, p58).

While Keller assumes that marriage can bring happiness, it is by no means guaranteed, rather, it is promissory, and contingent. So much so, that “you only discover your own happiness” when you act in certain way, which in this case is by living in an other-centered

way modelled on the life of Jesus, as depicted in the New Testament. I am not suggesting that a person should *not* value the needs of their partner, or practise humility, or that any Christian person should not strive to act in “response to what Jesus has done”, as surely that is core to their religious practise. Rather, I am highlighting that in this extract, these behaviours are not merely promoted because they are believed to be ethically right or scripturally sound, but as good and right because they will enhance happiness. Additionally, experiencing this happiness in marriage can then become a visible sign that one is truly saved, and living according to the pattern set forth in the New Testament. Again, happiness in marriage is linked to right Christian behaviour, and a sign of salvation. At several points in Keller’s book marriage is likened to salvation. For example, Keller writes:

Marriage is so much like salvation and our relationship with Christ that Paul says you can’t understand marriage without looking at the gospel ... salvation is a fresh start. Old things have passed away – behold a new has come (2011, p130).

Marriage becomes not just about how to experience “deep happiness”, but how to experience and understand salvation. This blurs happiness and salvation, where by, promising one, can be read as promising the other, which works to make the happiness-via-marriage script more compelling in a Christian context. Consequently, happiness functions here as a disciplinary technique. Rather than promote the behaviour as good in and of itself, or as a way for the Christian to emulate scripture, Keller uses happiness, and specifically an idea of happiness-via- marriage to regulate behaviour in accordance with his ideology. Similarly, Lee and Lee’s recommendation that sex be enjoyed only in marriage, is linked to emotional consequences, rather than scriptural command. They write, “when wrongly used, sex has the power to plunge us into the depths of pain and isolation; but, when rightly used, to lift us up to the heights of togetherness and ecstatic joy” (2007, p279). Here we see how happiness becomes a reward for those who behave rightly, where as those who desire otherwise are threatened with unhappiness. I return to the idea of unhappiness as deterrent in the next chapter.

Recalling DeRogatis’ argument that Protestant Evangelical literature on marriage can problematically link marriage and (married) sex to salvation, and to the visible display and enactment of one’s faith, these extracts also demonstrate how marriage, the right expression of sexuality and Christian identity and happiness can be interwoven in Protestant Evangelical texts. I suggest that this linking of marriage and salvation both facilitates, and is the consequence of, a conceptual slide between salvation and happiness. This allows the happiness-

via-marriage script to function as an effective method of regulating desire and behaviour in Protestant Evangelical teaching on marriage. It would be easy to conclude from extracts such as these that as marriage is “like salvation” and as “salvation is a fresh start” that marriage (and not, for example forgiveness or faith) is necessary to experience happiness and to be assured of God’s love and goodness. Additionally, there is perhaps an implication that if “deep happiness” comes via a certain kind of marriage that those without a partner will not have access to happiness.

We need to ask if passages like this, although well intended in helping those who are married to have good and healthy marriages, also work to suggest that those who are not married are missing out on the opportunity to lead a good, happy and fulfilling life, and in the case for the Christian, a godly life. I take up this question in the following chapter.

## **Conclusion**

In the previous chapter, I suggested weddings could be thought of as a kind of technology marketed as securing happiness, and therefore encouraging subjects to align with specific ideological interests so that they might be happy. In this chapter, we have seen that if that interest or system of regulation is Protestantism, then it is to the advantage of those who promote and defend that system that all who claim to be Protestant Evangelicals learn to perceive Protestant morality, and the expression of their sexuality always and only within (heterosexual) marriage as a good and desirable personal goal to strive for. As Gayle Rubin taught us, it is

in the interests of the smooth and continuous operation of such a system if the woman in question did not have many ideas of her own about whom she might want to sleep with. From the standpoint of the system, the preferred female sexuality would be one which responded to the desires of others, rather than one which actively desired and sought a response. (Rubin, 1975, p182)

In Protestant Evangelical teaching on marriage, the image of the wedding day as the happiest day, and as a sign of blessing and salvation, can be used to direct subjects towards upholding and replicating heteronormative ways of being in the world. Keller insists that “there’s no relationship between human beings that this is greater or more important than marriage” (p21), Lee and Lee write that “for many people, the most significant achievement of their lives will be building a loving marriage” (2007, p286). This sets up an understanding that marriage is necessary for fulfilment, intimacy and belonging. As in cultural marriage

narratives, a happy marriage is depicted here as the narrative goal. Privileging heterosexual marriage as the most desirable state of being, or as the only legitimate expression of sexuality, not only forces queer and non-monogamous sexual acts into the realm of illegitimate, it also devalues asexual and celibate lives, which is deeply ironic given that celibacy as a mode of being has been highly prized within Christianity, and is still, in many Evangelical communities the required path for anyone not in a married (heterosexual) relationship.

I opened this section with an epigraph taken from the one chapter of *The Meaning of Marriage* written by Kathy Keller. I'm struck by her suggestion that we see marriage as completion, words that seem completely at odds with her husband's own attempts to write of the goodness of 'singleness', and momentary consideration that as "Christianity's founder, Jesus Christ, and leading theologian, St Paul, were both single their entire lives, single adults cannot be seen as somehow less fully formed or realized human beings than married persons because Jesus Christ, a single man, was the perfect man" (Keller, 2011, p195). This is forgotten though, when marriage is viewed in Protestant Evangelical discourse as means of securing happiness or as necessary for self-development, completion, and even sanctification and salvation. Borrowing and legitimising a cultural happiness-via-marriage script is problematic for Protestant Evangelical teaching which claims to use the Bible as its authoritative source. Not only is it a narrative which is entirely at odds with some of the most significant lives recorded in the New Testament, it allows a promise of happiness to be used in these texts as an orienting device. By linking salvation, marriage and happiness, these texts regulate behaviour and desire by promising happiness, rather than resting on scriptural imperative alone.

In the next chapter, I turn to a selection of internet based texts, which offer an insight into how Christians are responding to the happiness-via-marriage script. Importantly, we will also see how this script works to regulate behaviour by threatening unhappiness to those who do not, or cannot, conform.

### Chapter 3. Christian (un)Happiness Online

*“You are an amazing leader! You’d make an excellent pastor’s wife someday!*

*#ThingsOnlyChristianWomenHear”*

*-Sarah Bessey<sup>12</sup>*

In this chapter, I consider how the happiness-via-marriage script circulates within Christian culture. To do so, I read a small selection of web based texts: blogs, testimonials on dating websites and tweets. In using these types of texts, I follow Ludger H. Viefhues-Bailey (2012), who used a similar method in his article ‘Holiness Sex: Conservative Christian Practises as Acts of Sanctification’. Viefhues-Bailey saw his article as continuing the work of DeRogatis by adding “the dimension of user-feedback” which allows us to “see how ordinary users adopt and adapt the message of elite evangelical advice columnists” (p5). In a similar fashion, this chapter will show some of the ways the happiness-via-marriage narrative is adopted and adapted by Christians. We will see that happiness in marriage can be read as a sign of blessing from God. Conversely, incorrect expression of sexuality and unhappiness can lead to the questioning of one’s Christian identity.

I begin with the “success stories” or testimonials sections on Christian dating websites. Here, recently married Christians post messages in which they declare their gratitude, happiness, and belief that God has answered their prayers. This highlights a conceptual slide between marriage, happiness, blessing and salvation. However, for a fuller picture, we also need to look at the ways in which the script is interpreted by those who find it limiting, and struggle to follow it. To do this I turn to the writing of Canadian Christian writer and blogger, Sarah Bessey. I focus on her account of purity culture, and the twitter conversation she inadvertently began with #ThingsOnlyChristianWomenHear. I read the tweets in this conversation as an example of hashtag activism, a moment in which social media was used to create a sense of collective identity and involvement. As is typical for hashtag activism, #ThingsOnlyChristianWomenHear allowed twitter users to take ownership of a narrative, and “continue the conversation beyond the originating dialogue by creating an identifier or tag for fellow activists” (Stache, 2015, p162).

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<sup>12</sup> (Bessey, 2017, <https://twitter.com/sarahbessey/status/854523872212729856> )

## **In the Company of Cinderella, Again: Fairy Tales and ‘Salvific’ Sex**

We have seen that Protestant Evangelical teaching on marriage can employ a happiness-via-marriage script to direct Christian subjects towards heterosexual marriage. This is an effective regulation device, as happiness scripts direct us towards the life that has been declared the good life. Just as stories have the capacity to “inform people’s sense of what counts as good or bad and how to act or how not to act” (Frank, 2010, p36), the happiness-via-marriage script works to guide, instruct and discipline individuals because it links certain outcomes to certain behaviours.

When Christian subjects narrativize their own lives according to the happiness-via-marriage script, marriage is clearly depicted as a reward from God in response to right Christian living and as an answer to prayer. Understanding happiness as a reward for right living allows the pursuit of happiness to regulate our choices, desire and behaviour. Additionally, because the Christian subject attributes causality both to their own behaviour and God’s willingness to answer prayers and intercede, happiness, particularly happiness in marriage, is read as a sign that one is blessed by God.

DeRogatis has shown that this sentiment is clearly expressed in Protestant Evangelical texts on marriage. She writes:

Many of the authors ... say that the full glory of evangelical faith is found in the marital bed ... sexual satisfaction is a sign that the participants are in a close relationship with God and are following God’s desire for creation as described in scripture (2005, p133).

This sentiment also underscores the “success stories” sections of Christian dating websites. For example, Cameron, posting on Christians Online ([www.christiansonline.com.au](http://www.christiansonline.com.au)) gushes, “To meet someone like Susannah over the internet must have been in God’s will, she is what I was praying for and with your help it became a reality. God truly does answer prayers.” Justine and Simon, posting on Christian Connection (<https://www.christianconnection.com>) write, “Without Christian Connection we may never have had the opportunity of meeting and we are so blessed to have found one another.” Other couples take us directly back to the realm of fairy tales where the marriage narrative persists so strongly. Mark, posting on Christians Online writes:

I have met the women I am meant to be with on this site and we are getting married in July this year. After the third time I met her I knew that she was the one I was to marry. We are very much in love with each other and cannot wait to begin our NEW life

together.

We actually met by accident as I was no longer interested in advertising myself and she was no longer interested in looking...then God told her to look for someone anywhere in QLD one last time b4 she logged off...she did and found me. ... the rest is what is slowly becoming a fairy tale.

And, Ruth, who met her husband through Christians Connection writes:

I would really encourage people to use this site. Step out of the comfort zone and wave at someone you like the look of, or better still reply to someone who waves at you, you never know, it could be the beginning of your happily ever after just as it has been for my husband and me.

In the “Success Stories” sections of Christian dating websites we see engaged or newly married Christian couples speaking of their new-found happiness in each other, referring to their new relationship as a blessing from God and the beginning of a new life. This feeling of happiness acts to affirm the rightness of one’s choices and the rightness of the script they are following. Ahmed teaches us that “happiness here involves the comfort of repetition, of following lines that have been given in advance” (2010, p48). Mead makes a similar point, writing that when a person marries, there is a “desire to enact a role that has been scripted by some more authoritative source than their own powers of invention” (2007, p9). These “success stories” demonstrate how happiness acts as external approval and reassurance that our lives are directed in the right way. Following the script, having a happy marriage and a happy family, becomes a means of confirming that you are living well.

When happiness is read by Protestant Evangelicals as confirmation of a life well lived *and* a blessing from God, unhappiness or disappointment become problematic. Sarah Bessey, who describes herself on her blog as an “Unqualified theologian” and “happy-clappy Jesus Follow” (<http://sarahbessey.com/blog/>) admits:

I have an uneasy relationship with death and suffering, with grief and lament. Perhaps it’s because ... my faith tradition is more comfortable with the light of certainty than the darkness of questions. Our narratives celebrate the simple victories, not the complex heartache. As a people, we prefer stories with a clear beginning, middle and end. We like our testimonies to end on a high note: and they lived happily ever after. Evil was defeated. Good won. The heroes faced conflict and were victorious. The end. (Bessey, 2015, p178)

If a happy marriage is blessing from God, where does this leave Christian subjects who do their best to follow the path but don't find happiness, who instead experience sadness or unhappy marriages? What of those who want to marry but have not been 'blessed' with a partner? And what of those who, to borrow from another fairy tale, are more like Little Red Riding Hood and not inclined to stick to the path? How do they respond to the promise of happiness via marriage and the inverse threat of unhappiness for those who make the wrong choices?

### **Crumpled Paper and Cups of Cloudy Saliva: This is What You Are Like**

Happiness scripts work in two ways. Firstly, they direct us towards objects, choices and relationships that are deemed as good, but they also teach us that to choose otherwise is to walk a path that is not good, and not happy. Ahmed writes that "Happiness scripts are powerful even when we fail or refuse to follow them, even when we deviate from their line. ... Happiness scripts encourage us to avoid the unhappy consequences of deviation by making those consequences explicit" (2010, p91). We can, therefore, be enticed, or even coerced, into following the happiness-via-marriage script, so that we might not suffer unhappiness.

Sarah Bessey has written on her blog in detail about some of the less-than-happy ways Protestant Evangelical youth are taught to direct their lives towards marriage, particularly in the movement known as 'Purity Culture'. Bessey recalls being:

nineteen years old and crazy in love with Jesus when that preacher told an auditorium I was "damaged goods" because of my sexual past ... he didn't call me up to the front and name me. But he stood up there and talked about me with such *disgust*, like I couldn't be in that real-life crowd of young people worshipping in that church. (2013, n.p)

Here, rather than a scriptural command, emotional shaming for those who have had sex before or outside of marriage, and the threat of shame, unhappiness, of not really belonging, are used to direct those who might be contemplating lives that do not follow the path which dictates that sex is for marriage. Similarly, Joshua Harris<sup>13</sup>, author of *I Kissed Dating Goodbye*, the widely

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<sup>13</sup> Amy DeRogatis describes Harris as "undoubtedly the most popular voice" in "Christian teenage sexual education" (2005, p109). It is interesting to note that Harris has recently retracted some of his views, after receiving extensive criticism from those who felt his book was used against them as a way of punishing them for various sexual 'wrong-doings' (<http://www.christianpost.com/news/abstinence-author-pastor-joshua-harris-apologizes-for-telling-christians-not-to-date-in-i-kissed-dating-goodbye-168650/>).

read advice manual for Protestant Evangelical youth, describes a couple who had pre-marital sex as “violating each other’s purity” (1997, p69). Remembering that for Protestant Evangelicals (heterosexual) sex is “natural, biblically sanctioned, and if practised in the proper arena of marriage, sex can be salvific” (DeRogatis, 2005, p99), the implication is that, outside of the frame of heterosexual marriage, it is not natural, not sanctioned, and detrimental for salvation. For the Protestant Evangelical subject, the threat of unhappiness is great indeed.

Bessey’s experience shows how the threat of unhappiness and shame was used by a speaker to deter her and other Christian youth from having sex before they were married:

he passed around a cup of water and asked us all to spit into it... Then he held up that cup of cloudy saliva from the crowd and asked, “Who wants to drink this? ... This is what you are like if you have sex before marriage,” he said seriously, “you are asking your future husband or wife to drink this cup.” (Bessey, 2013, n.p)

Like Bessey, I recall one night at a youth group, perhaps in year nine or ten, being shown a pristine piece of white paper by the Youth Minister’s wife. This paper was me, or my virginity, which by implication is also my self-worth. The good and godly thing is to be able to present that pure piece of paper to my hypothetical future husband. If I had sex, it would be like tearing off a corner or crumpling the edges. This story, which works so hard to teach listeners that *only* married (heterosexual) sex is right and good, can result in the hearer becoming so detached from their sexuality, that any expression of sexuality, married or unmarried, heterosexual or homosexual is connected to unhappiness and shame. Additionally, abstaining becomes a marker not just of self-worth, but of identity.

Blogger, Samantha Pugsley, who was brought up in a community steeped in Purity Culture made a ‘True Love Waits’ vow at age 10, and has written to show how this sort of discourse on sex and marriage can have unforeseen negative consequences. She was taught that sex outside of marriage was “sinful and dirty” and something you would “go to hell” for (Pugsley, 2014, n.p). She recalls wearing her virginity as a badge of honour, and then being completely let down by the promise of happiness and godliness that had been assured as her reward, *if* she waited till she was married before having sex. She concludes:

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In collaboration with Jessica Van Deer Wyngaard, Harris is now working on a film project titled ‘I survived I Kissed Dating Goodbye’ (<https://www.isurvivedikdg.com/>).

Ten-year-old girls want to believe in fairy tales. Take this pledge and God will love you so much and be so proud of you, they told me. If you wait to have sex until marriage, God will bring you a wonderful Christian husband and you'll get married and live happily ever after, they said. Waiting didn't give me a happily ever after. Instead, it controlled my identity for over a decade, landed me in therapy, and left me a stranger in my own skin. I was so completely ashamed of my body and my sexuality that it made having sex a demoralizing experience. (Pugsley, 2014, n.p)

Where Pugsley was promised happiness if she waited, Bessey and those of us who sat through strange ripping up of paper demonstrations were threatened with unhappiness in marriage if we did not wait, if we had sex with someone else first. Bessey reflects that:

Over the years the messages melded together into the common refrain: “Sarah, your virginity was a gift and you gave it away. You threw away your virtue for a moment of pleasure. You have twisted God’s ideal of sex and love and marriage. You will never be free of your former partners. ... Your virginity belonged to your future husband. You stole from him. If – if! – you ever get married, you’ll have tremendous baggage to overcome in your marriage, you’ve ruined everything. No one honourable or godly wants to marry you. You are damaged goods, Sarah. (Bessey, 2013)

Self-worth, and the promise of a happy future, are tied up with restricting sexual expression to within the frame of heterosexual marriage. Marriage brings happiness, and if you want that happiness you will seek marriage, and you will regulate the expression of your sexuality, reserving it for marriage, so that you might be happy. This is illustrative of how a happiness-via-marriage script can operate within Protestant Evangelical contexts.

### **Things Only Christian Women Hear**

On the 18<sup>th</sup> April 2017 Bessey sparked an international conversation when she casually concluded a tweet with what became a trending hashtag, #ThingsOnlyChristianWomenHear. This hashtag, though at times heartbreaking, comforted me, as it showed I wasn’t alone in being unhappy with the way some Christian churches were talking to women about marriage.

#ThingsOnlyChristianWomenHear created waves in evangelical circles and was reported by various online news sites and forums, including Huffington Post, CBE

International and Relevant Magazine<sup>14</sup>. It allowed Christian women to stand together and voice the discontent they felt in response to the patronising and sexist comments they were hearing in their communities. Highlighting the limitations of the gendered happiness scripts Christian women are expected to walk, in order to have a good, meaningful or successful life, Bessey began the conversation by tweeting, “You are an amazing leader! You'd make an excellent pastor's wife someday! #ThingsOnlyChristianWomenHear” (Bessey 2017). Marriage is once again depicted as the expected goal for Christian Women.

The following selection of tweets from women who took to twitter and used Bessey’s hashtag shows the frustration they feel as a result of being encouraged and expected to place marriage and family above all else. They used the hashtag to challenge the idea that as a good Christian female subject, one’s goals should be directed towards marriage and family. For example, twitter user Kim Ralfe wrote:

Said to male/female youth "Every woman has an inherent desire for children. If she doesn't, something's wrong." #ThingsOnlyChristianWomenHear” (KJRalfe, 2017).

Once married, a good, rightly behaved, rightly desiring Christian wife would place the interests, goals and happiness of her husband above her own:

Your dream now should only be to build your husbands dreams. What? #ThingsOnlyChristianWomenHear (ReadAdaHearts, 2017).

#ThingsOnlyChristianWomenHear A husband's happiness and fulfillment depends on his wife. (mimbasinger, 2017).

Particularly common were tweets expressing discontent with being told that paths to happiness which did not focus on marriage and family, were less worthwhile, unnecessary and perhaps ingenuine. Even going to Bible college was read as a way of stepping closer to marriage to a Christian man:

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<sup>14</sup> <https://relevantmagazine.com/article/what-thingsonlychristianwomenhear-showed-about-the-struggle-of-women-in-the-church/>

<https://www.cbeinternational.org/blogs/55-things-only-christian-women-hear>

[http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/entry/christian-women-on-twitter-unload-about-misogyny-in-the-church\\_us\\_58f8f71ce4b018a9ce592e05](http://www.huffingtonpost.com.au/entry/christian-women-on-twitter-unload-about-misogyny-in-the-church_us_58f8f71ce4b018a9ce592e05)

"So you're going to a Christian college to get married?"  
#ThingsOnlyChristianWomenHear

(RedHeadDebate, 2017)

"Bible college? Ah, you mean 'bridal college. Great place to meet a godly man. <wink, wink, nudge, nudge>" #ThingsOnlyChristianWomenHear

(GodsDesignPerth, 2017)

Women also reacted to the idea that appropriate expression of Christian female subjectivity and the ability to understand and experience the gospel was tied up in marriage and family. Twitter user ALORA writes:

"You need a husband to help you strengthen your relationship with Christ."  
#ThingsOnlyChristianWomenHear (bleu\_wallflower, 2017).

Tweets bound by #ThingsOnlyChristianWomenHear show that within Christian culture happiness in marriage is read as a sign of blessing from God; that being married would strengthen one's faith, and make a woman a better, more complete Christian subject. Significantly, it shows the discontent and disconnect many Christian women feel towards their own faith communities.

## **Conclusion**

Success stories on Christian dating websites and #ThingsOnlyChristianWomenHear (while sadly not being things *only* Christian women hear, but echoes of things many women hear), demonstrates that marriage narratives and the happiness-via-marriage script pervade contemporary Christian culture. While engaged and newly married Christian couples share "success stories" which show it is possible to interpret the trajectory of one's life according to a happiness-via-marriage script, Christian women who used Bessey's hashtag appear tired of hearing that the goal of their life should be to fall in love (with a man) and secure a lifelong monogamous heterosexual relationship, sanctioned by marriage.

These accounts show that marriage is considered a sign of right living, and God's blessing. It can be read as an answer to prayer and the start of a new and happy life. It is through marriage that the Christian subject is complete. In the words of Timothy Keller, marriage is "a vehicle" through which couples help "each other become their glorious future selves through sacrificial service" (2011, p203), or to recall the words of the Sydney Diocesan

Doctrine Commission, “it is *only with* the man that the woman can be God’s image” (2015, p61). Christian women presumably have personalities as complex as any other woman’s, they would surely have a great range of skills and abilities, and they may be a great leaders, thinkers and educators, but at the end of the day, their (our) communities too often teach them (us) to look forward to the happiness and completion that comes from being somebody’s wife.

For the Christian subject, unhappiness, particularly unhappiness and discontent with marriage and marriage narratives, can come to suggest questionable or deficient faith and insufficient trust in God. Bessey writes of those who have left the church, “believing that their darkness or grief or sadness or despair or sickness is their own fault because they simply lacked faith. When their stories didn’t line up with our narrative, they felt shame and eventually disappeared” (2015, p181). This has wide ranging and potentially detrimental consequences, some of which can be seen in the accounts told in Julia Baird’s (2017) recent work on domestic violence in the church. For example, Baird writes of one woman whose husband declared, ““Your problem is you won't obey me. . . . You are a failure as a wife, as a Christian, as a mother. You are an insubordinate piece of s\*\*t.””(n.p) Of course, this might be a rare and extreme scenario, (though I fear it may be more common than we care to admit), however, if a happy marriage is understood as a sign of salvation, or blessing from God, or even simply affirmation of well-directed life, we would do well to pause and consider not only how this rhetoric leads us to perform happiness even when we don’t feel it, but how it may be contributing to the silencing and shaming of women who are in unsafe situations.

Moving beyond a catchy hashtag, what do we do with the knowledge that marriage narratives and happiness discourse circulate between Christians? By way of conclusion, it is to this question I now turn.

## **Conclusion: For Better or Worse, In Sickness and in Health**

Throughout this thesis I have argued that rather than relying solely on scriptural exegesis, a happiness-via-marriage script circulates in Protestant Evangelical discourse promoting marriage as necessary for health and happiness. This script also suggests that marriage is a confirmation of a life well lived and blessed by God, and an outward display of inward belief. The promise of future happiness, and threat of unhappiness, is used to restrict sexual expression to heterosexual marriage, and to make both marriage and the regulation of desire appear natural, appealing, beneficial and necessary. This invalidates unmarried forms of life, as it equates being unmarried with unhappiness, lack of worth and ‘bad’ life choices.

In this final section, I want to briefly consider how we might respond to the happiness-via-marriage script, particularly in relation to how it functions in Protestant Evangelical discourse, but hopefully in a way that is also meaningful more broadly. Drawing on Ahmed’s ‘Politics of the Hap’, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s (2003) model of reparative reading, and Jack Zipes’ (2016) game of ‘what if’, I suggest that a productive way of responding to the happiness-via-marriage script is through a twinned approach of reparative reading and alternative or subversive story-telling. This could foster an openness to possibility, thus diminishing the compelling appeal and comfort of following the happiness-via-marriage script.

### **Hap, or, No Guaranteed Outcome**

Sarah Bessey did marry, despite the predictions of the Evangelical preacher with the cup of saliva. In her book, *Out of Sorts*, Bessey reflects that marriage “can seem a bit overwhelming – the whole ‘for as long you both shall live part, the idea of linking our lives together without knowledge of the future or the ways our lives will unfold. We aren’t guaranteed any particular outcome” (2015, p97). Bessey married knowing it would not guarantee happily ever-after. She didn’t long for marriage as a happy social good. She reflects, “I didn’t marry Brian because I wanted to get married in the abstract. I wanted to marry Brian” (2015, p98). Bessey married with an openness to possibility. We could say, she married in a way which refutes a notion of happiness-via-marriage and instead embraces, what Ahmed has termed, ‘a politics of the hap’.

In her conclusion to *The Promise of Happiness*, Ahmed (2010) advocates moving towards a Politics of the Hap. A Politics of the Hap allows us to recognise ways of being happy that do not revolve around the image of the happy family or the wedding day as the happiest day of one’s life. It is also allows for the possibility of unhappiness; recognising and valuing

the productive potential of unhappiness, or of failing to follow normative happiness scripts. Similarly, Halberstam suggests that “under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer far more creative, cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (2011, p2-3). Failing at normative happiness and learning, that at times, it may be better to be content with relinquishing certain goals, such as marriage or family “allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behaviour and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods” (Halberstam, 2011, p3). Forgetting or rewriting the happiness-via-marriage script will involve opening up many possible paths, that lead to many possible futures. This may make us aware of uncertainty, which may be uncomfortable, but may also enable us to see a richness of possibility.

Ahmed asks us to see “unhappiness as a form of political action: the act of saying no or of pointing out injuries” (2010, p207). However, Braidotti (2008, 2009) reminds us, that saying “no” is not necessarily a useful endpoint, instead, we need to take a further step and say “yes” to an alternative action. Unlike Jacklyn Geller, who claimed, “we must stop repeating the absurd mantra ‘its ok to be single’, and adopt the more aggressive stance that, ‘it’s not ok to be married’” (2001, p72), I prefer to borrow Braidotti’s claim that an affirmative politics is still a transformative politics, even if it “is not about oppositional strategy”, but about “practices of daily activism or interventions in and on the world we inhabit for ourselves and for future generations” (2008, p18). Rather than aggressively standing against the happiness-via-marriage script by demanding that no-one should ever marry, we can perhaps adopt the more challenging, but also more freeing position of celebrating lives that do not follow the script. This may also mean that those of us who do marry might be obliged to find ways to marry, and to speak of marriage, that do not uphold the script.

We might actively choose to tell stories that celebrate small moments of – perhaps unlooked for – daily happiness, or more complex stories about marriage and (un)happiness. We might create more space in which to grieve, recognising that sadness too is necessary. Arthur Frank writes that “A good life requires telling any story from as many alternative perspectives as possible and recognizing how *all* the characters are trying to hold their own” (2010, p146). Like Bessey, we might admit that marriage does not secure “any particular outcome” (2015, p97). Importantly, we might remember that happiness and unhappiness are not narrative end points, but lived experiences which contribute to the richness of our lives.

## Reparative Reading

Sedgwick (2003) has compared two possible ways of reading texts: paranoid reading and reparative reading. A paranoid reading position seeks to uncover truths and acts “as though to make something visible as a problem were, if not a mere hop, skip, and jump away from getting it solved, at least self-evidently a step in that direction” (Sedgwick, 2003, p139). If we were to respond to the happiness-via-marriage script from a paranoid position, we would assume that *if only* women knew how this script worked they would have more freedom to act differently. Or *if only* we knew who was really to blame for perpetuating this story we would be able to stop it being told. However, if we work from a reparative position it can be possible to reread a culture, even one which has been against a particular group of people or practices, in ways that are affirming, or that allow for some sort of creative potential. This is because:

the reparative reading position undertakes a different range of affects, ambitions and risks. What we can best learn from such practices are, perhaps, the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture – even a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them. (Sedgwick, 2003, pp150-151)

Recall Halberstam’s criticism that “when it comes to gender norms and sexual mores, religion really is the root of all evil” (2012, p28). A paranoid reading position might lead us to try and prove who is at fault for circulating the script, and I admit, it has been tempting to fall into that pattern of analysis. However, to borrow from Sedgwick, “Supposing we were ever so sure of all those things – what would we know then that we don’t already know?” (2003, p123). Knowing that this script circulates between Christians, and in society more broadly, the question is not “but whose fault is it really?” rather, to move forward, we must ask, what do we do with the information that this script exists and is used to regulate desire and behaviour?

I advocate the telling of alternative stories, as “we may all know, see and acknowledge the clichéd quality of the romance plot, but until we are raised with different understandings of love, desire and intimacy we must still cleave on to it, still long for the happily ever after.” (Halberstam, 2012, p125). These stories though, should not just be about other ways of being happy, they should acknowledge and celebrate the complexities our lives, reminding us that whether married or not, we will sometimes rejoice and other times we will grieve. Arthur Frank argues that if we tell stories from multiple perspectives we are able “to hear different possibilities within them, especially the possibilities that at first seemed most intolerable”

(2010, p159). By removing the promise of happiness, we might imagine a multitude of creative ways of living life. One way of doing this is Jack Zipes' game of 'what if'.

### **What If?**

Fairy tale and folklore scholar Jack Zipes is a proponent of subversive story telling. Zipes teaches children to play a game of 'what if', arguing that "different tales, from 'Cinderella' to 'Rumpelstiltskin', can be told to children and then changed in an effort to liberate them from detrimental socialization" (2016, p279). Changing stories by telling new versions of old stories matters, as it allows us to see more options. Just as "the message of a classical fairy tale can be altered, so can one play with and alter one's own life" (p280). From Zipes we learn that we can play with stories and cultural scripts by questioning elements of the plot and the narrative outcomes

When we play 'what if' with the happiness-via-marriage script, we create the space to question guaranteed future happiness as a good goal or motivation. We can begin to ask questions which give us room to live our lives without following the script, without limiting ourselves to always only being against it. We could retell marriage narratives by asking, 'what if there were other ways to be happy?' or 'what if there were other ways to belong?' We might then begin to reread our own lives, and those of others, to see possibility rather than limitation. Lives we might once have dismissed or condemned as lonely, empty or even deviant, might now be considered as joyful, relational, full and contributing greatly to the lives of others.

In a blog post on the Reconciling Ministries Network website, newly ordained deacon, M Barclay, a transgendered person working and worshipping within the United Methodist Church in Illinois, reflects on the ordination process. Barclay writes:

And my joy about getting to be commissioned today is yes, related to the long journey, and yes, related to the reality that the church is saying yes to a queer and non-binary trans minister ... because we are discriminated against so heavily, queerness and transness often become the only lens on our places in the church. But we are all also more than our sexual orientation and gender identities and how the church responds to them. And in this case – my joy is that I get to BE who I have longed to BE in the world – a pastoral presence of compassion and justice exactly as I am, on behalf of the church. And all of this together, feels like wholeness (Barclay, 2017)

Here, experiences of "joy" and "wholeness", have little to do with being completed by another person in a partnered relationship or replicating heteronormative modes of existence. Barclay's

story is of course just one story, and the pattern of Barclay's life should not simply become an alternative template, rather it can remind us that there are, even within in Protestant Evangelical Christianity, rewarding ways of living life without focusing on marriage and family.

### **Woman, here is your Son**

In 'The Straightest Story Ever Told', published in *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*, Richard Rambuss (2011) argues that the New Testament may not be the best place to find examples of nuclear family and instead can be used to explore alternative ways of understanding kinship. This offers readers a chance to ask, 'what if there was a different way to read New Testament stories?' which in turn, leads to a reparative reading of the Gospels, creating space to ask, 'what if there were other ways to think about family?'

Rambuss takes us to the scene of Jesus' crucifixion. Jesus' mother is in the crowd, watching her son die. As the oldest son, Jesus 'fails' in his duty to financially provide for his mother. At his death, he hands this responsibility to a friend. Rambuss writes:

Jesus's remarkable speech act from the cross is the rare instance when he directly concerns himself with a domestic matter. Indeed, this unmarried, itinerant rabbi – leader of a band of disciples who have left their homes and families to take up with him and each other instead – more often comes across in the Gospels as antagonistic to the sanctity of the family ... even the kinship relation that Jesus establishes here by fiat at Calvary between Mary and John hardly answers to any prevailing domestic ideal, either of his time or our own (pp545-6).

Rambuss suggests that this speech act (woman, here is your son) creates "something new: a family formed after a different order" (p546). Jesus gives his mother away. Here, perhaps, is a reworked wedding ceremony. According to Christian theology, Jesus' crucifixion guarantees salvation (a different kind of 'happily ever-after'), but, as we are reminded by Rambuss, it also, institutes a new family and a new identity, which is decidedly not dependent on biological connections.

Arguments such as those made by Rambuss suggest it is possible for Christian culture and texts to be reread through a practise of reparative reading. From this reading position, we may be able to summon the strength needed to live outside the happiness-via-marriage script, perhaps building a nonnormative family of our choosing, finding happiness in relationships

with kin who are not our biological relatives. But what of the actual Protestant wedding ceremony?

### **Returning to the Protestant Evangelical Wedding Ceremony**

Although the wedding day may be imagined to be the gateway to happiness, and while marriage is seen as the happy and successful enactment of Christian faith and heterosexuality, the promises made in the protestant ceremony itself are much more in tune with Ahmed's politics of the hap, than with guaranteeing happiness. If we returned to the ceremony, and looked not for signs of limitation, but instead, attempted to read the ceremony for signs of possibility, we might see that in fact, the vows made in a protestant wedding ceremony do not, at any point promise happiness.

The vows, detailed in protestant prayer books, and recorded by Lee and Lee in *The Marriage Book* (2007, p11), are of course promissory and future oriented, they are to take effect “from this day forward”, but they are to remain valid “for better” *and* “for worse”, “for richer” *and* “for poorer”, and this to be done both “in sickness” and “in health”. These vows implicitly acknowledge that life after a wedding is not necessarily happier than life before it. Events might be “worse”, bank accounts might be “poorer” and individuals may not be healthier or happier.

In these vows, we are reminded that marriage does not guarantee happily-ever-after. A person who marries is not guaranteed health and wellness. They make a commitment in the full knowledge life after marriage may be poorer, that it will include sickness and sadness. A ‘happy marriage’ then, or being happy in whatever circumstance, can be thought of more as an openness to possibility or an everyday practise. Regardless of whether or not a person is married, they can live a life open to happiness and unhappiness.

Rather than trying to move towards a longed for imagined happy future, or fearing living unhappily ever-after, we can remove the idea of happiness as narrative-end-point and “embrace what happens” (Ahmed, 2019, p223). Remembering that marriage vows are made to be kept *for better or worse*, may help us, whether we are straight or queer, married or unmarried, religious or otherwise, to find the courage to set aside the happiness-via-marriage script. Acknowledging the possibility of happiness and unhappiness, and not seeing either as tied to a particular relational or moral state, might free us to be committed to our everyday lives, as well as our futures. We might even forget the last words of the famous fairy tale ending, and learn to simply, but triumphantly conclude, ‘they lived’.

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