

Lifting the Veil on Traditional White Weddings

By

Kelly Icton

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Thesis Director: Carolyn Eichner, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Department of Women's Studies

University Honors Program
University of South Florida
St. Petersburg, Florida

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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Kelly Icton

Has been approved by the Examining Committee
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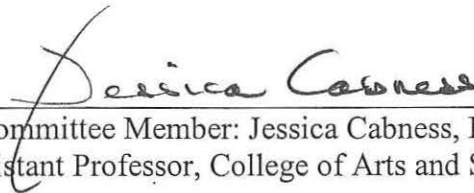
Examining Committee:



Thesis Director: Carolyn Eichner, Ph.D.
Associate Professor, Department of Women's Studies



Thesis Committee Member: Raymond Arsenault, Ph.D.
Professor, College of Arts and Sciences



Thesis Committee Member: Jessica Cabness, Ph.D., LCSW
Assistant Professor, College of Arts and Sciences

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Introduction

The ideology of romance overrides contradictions and simplifies overwhelming complexities. Romance is there to blur the past, and fudge over the real contradictions of the present, in order to control the future.

Nicola Field, *Over the Rainbow*, 1995¹

The topic for my thesis is a critique of traditional American “white” weddings and the associated fairytale imagery using a materialist feminist approach. The idea for this topic came to fruition after a classroom discussion regarding a single patriarchal wedding custom sparked my interest in researching the ways in which weddings validate and reinforce traditions that symbolize women’s secondary status in society. I wanted to explore each aspect of the mainstream American wedding- the traditional, “white” wedding. Upon delving into the scholarly research on the subject, it became apparent that only a few critical examinations of weddings existed and no single body of work combined all of the elements involved in the ideological creation of the traditional “white” wedding. After perusing through various primary and secondary resources, I started to recognize the complex interplay between history, popular culture, and capitalism and their combined role in perpetuating rituals of subordination obscured by notions of romance and fantasy.

This endeavor focuses on the relationship between gender and weddings and incorporates the institution of marriage only as it directly relates to weddings. I am not questioning the desire of committed adults to express their relationships in a meaningful way; I merely want to illustrate the cleverly masked patriarchal practices and the asymmetrical gender experience of modern traditional weddings. Although it is unrealistic to view wedding traditions in purely negative terms or to deny the significance

that our culture associates with this transition in life, it is equally important to understand the oppressive history, cultural biases, and capitalistic interests preserved by this sacred rite-of-passage. Most cultural traditions reflect dominant class ideologies and have broader social and political meaning than their immediate function serves, and this is the case with weddings.

My chapters reflect the key symbols, gender roles, and societal expectations involved in each step of the ideological creation of the traditional white wedding. I explain how popular culture, historical practices, religion, and the boom in princess imagery and fairytale weddings influence ideas about contemporary weddings and function as socializing mechanisms.²

Chapter 1 begins with an explanation of the dilemma that I see in continuing patriarchal wedding traditions rather than working to generate new ones. I define the term “traditional” in the context of weddings and discuss the key “traditions” that link modern day weddings to the past. An analysis of ancient Roman and Greek rituals begin the historical time line followed by a brief glimpse into medieval times, eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe, and the Victorian culture that triggered the rise of the big white wedding.

Chapter 2 provides a detailed look at the various socializing mechanisms and popular culture influences that help to shape the appeal of weddings for girls and women. This includes an exploration of the roles that the mass media and popular culture play in forming gender identities and examines the influence of children’s toys and films (focusing heavily on the princess imagery), women’s magazines, television shows and

movies, and their role in planting the desire to view weddings as the pinnacle of the female, but not the male, experience.

Chapter 3 examines the pre-wedding rituals and symbolism of the engagement period. This chapter begins by explaining the gender norms and expectations associated with the proposal and wedding planning. It addresses issues such as “popping the question,” the role of male-initiated engagements, the patriarchal patterns evident in invitations and announcements, and engaged womens’ primary role in wedding planning. This leads into a discussion of female-centered engagement activities including wedding shopping, bridal showers, and the creation of bridal gift registries.

Chapter 4 discusses the setting, the characters, and a chronological analysis of each phase of the traditional white wedding ceremony and reception. The role of each person and his or her costume is analyzed, and I describe some of the key historical and contemporary symbolism of his or her presence, with an emphasis on the dominant role of the bride and the minimal role of the groom. This chapter touches upon all aspects of the ceremony and reception that reflect gender conformity and patriarchal bias, including rituals such as the bride being walked down the aisle and the presentation of the “new” couple with the groom’s surname. I discuss the significance of the Christian church as a component of the standard “white wedding.” The burden of religious, social, and familial influences is included as it pertains to each ritual.

The conclusion summarizes my key points and discusses the difficulty in modifying the most coveted American ritual due to the complex interplay between history, popular culture, and capitalism. My thesis concludes by arguing that women and men need to start taking a more critical look at the traditions that they uphold as romantic

and sentimental and recognize that blind adherence to invented “tradition” inhibits social progress. When our society begins to take a more balanced approach to celebrating unions, we can reject the willingly accepted notion that weddings reflect “an odd mix of patriarchy and gender conformity with egalitarianism and individuality.”³

¹ Nicola Field, *Over the Rainbow: Money, Class and Homophobia* (London: Pluto Press, 1995), 29.

² I explain this idea further in chapter one with an explanation of Eric Hobsbawm’s idea of invented traditions and their function in society.

³ Cele Otnes and Elizabeth Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams: The Allure of the Lavish Wedding* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003), 113.

Chapter One: Historical Roots of Traditional American White Weddings

Wedlock is tainted by the historical residue of female subordination; an overwhelming, oppressive social history that many modern brides and grooms are simply not aware of

Jaelyn Geller,
Here Comes the Bride, 2001¹

Getting married is one of the most celebrated and coveted rituals in contemporary American culture. This tradition is not, however, merely the coming together of family and friends to recognize the union of two people; it is a regulated, tactical, and highly scripted ritual that has resisted significant modification throughout history. The modern traditional wedding naturalizes an array of oppressive historical practices by using romantic fantasy to validate and perpetuate the practice. This profoundly symbolic ritual maintains a hegemonic stronghold on the collective consciousness so powerful that attempts to scrutinize or demystify the practice are most often rebuffed or stifled.² American culture maintains a blind adherence to wedding tradition without acknowledging the influence of powerful ruling interests, thus contributing to the preservation of capitalist patriarchal social arrangements in our society.

The institution of marriage continues to progress slowly toward a more egalitarian arrangement as economic conditions and social norms evolve and reshape its significance within our society. In contrast, mainstream beliefs regarding weddings have remained more or less fixed, relatively unaffected by the times, despite the development of divergent social practices.³ In order to combat the rising backlash against traditional values, “the dominant ideologies of capitalism and patriarchy are in a constant state of crisis-management, struggling to maintain social order.”⁴ As a result, a massive propaganda campaign is constantly working to naturalize rituals of subordination in

weddings, by masking their broad implications with a seductive display of romance and fantasy, in order to perpetuate the imbalance of power between men and women and to generate a massive outflow of capital. This idea is supported by the fact that demand for lavish weddings has increased despite women's increased educational accomplishments, professional mobility, reproductive freedoms, and political representation.⁵ Even oppressed groups assimilate these dominant class beliefs to gain a sense of normalcy, regardless of the persistence of discrimination based on gender, race, class, and sexual orientation.

An analysis of the historical influences that help to shape and define modern-day nuptials is necessary to appreciate the continuing allure of the traditional wedding. Until the latter part of the 20th century, marriage was the universal objective for women.⁶ As products of a male-dominated society, generations of women internalized and passed on the social customs that defined their lives primarily in terms of their relationships to men. Finding a suitable husband and marrying signified their central aspiration in life to ensure economic security, and ironically, social respectability. Wedlock conferred upon women certain protections while simultaneously imposing rigid restrictions. The subordinate roles women accepted as wives were limiting yet essential for survival. As a cultural entity, women conformed to and embraced the desired notions of femininity and found meaning in their roles despite the oppressive confines of the patriarchal institutions that shaped their identities.

Many of the rituals present in today's traditional wedding include symbolic references to past social or religious practices. The historical necessity of these practices, however, ceases to exist in contemporary society, yet these rituals are immortalized in

this culturally sacred event as a sort of bow to tradition. Historian Eric Hobsbawm coined the term “invented traditions” to describe the use of old traditions for new purposes. He defines “invented tradition” as “a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.”⁷ Hobsbawm maintains that “invented traditions” operate to symbolize social cohesion and collective identities, legitimize social hierarchies, and socialize people into particular social contexts.⁸ Many of the traditions of white weddings are “invented traditions,” which function in the way Hobsbawm details.

Ancient civilizations established the template for the future treatment of women in the Western world, evidence of which dates back to as early as the tenth century B.C.E with the biblical story of Adam and Eve.⁹ This legend is supported by other Christian scriptures such as Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, which states that the husband is head of the wife as Christ is head of the Church.¹⁰ The authors of the Bible clearly established a hierarchical relationship between husbands and wives, which began in the Old Testament and continued in the New Testament. Thousands of centuries after its inception, this widespread Judeo-Christian belief in the inherent inequality between men and women continues to maintain a stronghold on the American psyche, influencing mainstream ideas about marriage and weddings. The notions of intrinsic female inferiority and women’s subordinate role in marriage persist either blatantly or representatively, as Judeo-Christian beliefs maintain their predominant influence in wedding culture and in American society as a whole. Traditional white weddings cleverly mask the implications of this culturally-pervasive belief by purposely seeking to invoke an emotional rather

than a critical response to antiquated wedding customs.

In the early societies of Rome and Greece, financial arrangements between two men sealed the fate of a woman's life. In fact, the term "wedding" derives its meaning from the Anglo-Saxon word "wedd," which is the money or barter paid to the bride's father in exchange for his daughter.¹¹ Utilizing this term thus pays tribute to the ancient practice of purchasing a bride. In Greece, the economic arrangement was an oral agreement in which the bride's father pledged his daughter to the groom without her presence or consent.¹² In Rome, the betrothal entailed a ceremony between a woman's oldest living male relative and the groom who would ask something similar to "Do you promise to give your daughter to be my wedded wife?" to complete the business transaction.¹³ In both cultures, a woman was a commodity to be transferred from her father's household to her husband's, a tradition whose remnants remain part of many modern wedding ceremonies demonstrated by officiants asking the bride's father, "Who gives this woman in marriage?"¹⁴

The next significant marker in wedding history occurred in Europe during the Middle Ages when the Catholic Church gained authority over marriage law, resulting in widespread changes in the wedding ceremony.¹⁵ First, the mutual will of two persons to marry became the main criterion for marriage, replacing the need for parental consent. Second, the church required the presence of witnesses to validate the union and a priest to perform the ceremony in a church.¹⁶ In a pattern similar to past societies, medieval culture confirmed men as the masters of their wives, based on religious, political, and legal premises.¹⁷ At the top of the social ladder, the nobles formed marital unions to maintain power alliances and status. Female virginity remained a carefully guarded

commodity to ensure proper unions and inheritance. Men, on the other hand, remained free to engage in sexual liaisons prior to marriage without consequence.¹⁸ Honoring virginity remains a double standard in modern ceremonies. Women overwhelmingly choose to wear white dresses and veils despite the historical use of this white costume to reflect the patriarchal honor of presenting a virginal bride to a groom.

Perhaps the most formative time in the creation of modern Western marriage occurred in late eighteenth century England as religious and social upheavals started reshaping the role of marriage. Historian Lawrence Stone contends that in the mid-eighteenth century, with the rise of individualism and the belief in the right to emotional happiness, the idea of romantic love naturally developed as the rationale for marrying.¹⁹ As a result, a trend toward companionate marriage based on romantic love, and away from arranged marriage, began to take hold, thus creating the breeding grounds for the beginning of a romantic consumer culture.²⁰ However, women were still not considered equal to their husbands as demonstrated by the common-law idea of "femme covert," created by William Blackstone in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England*: "By marriage, the husband and wife are one person in law, that is, the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during marriage."²¹ The Protestant ideal, which evolved in American culture, envisioned marriage as a complementary but unequal relationship.²² Nineteenth-century American women experienced an absolutely subordinate life the minute they assumed their husband's name. Laws in New England excluded married women from basic rights such as the ability to sue, contract, or execute wills. Women also involuntarily forfeited their wages and estates to their husbands.²³

The lavish "white wedding" dates back to the Victorian era and the union of

British Queen Victoria to Prince Albert in 1840.²⁴ This celebration set a new standard of ceremony in Britain, and American culture quickly adopted the tenets of Queen Victoria's wedding.²⁵ The "white wedding," as it came to be known in American etiquette books, incorporated traditions of the past, such as the bride being given away, with new elements such as the bride receiving an engagement ring and the bride and groom going on a honeymoon.²⁶ The Victorian era inspired other rituals that focused attention on the bride-to-be: an extended engagement period and the introduction of published announcements and printed invitations.²⁷

Queen Victoria's marriage was arranged, but in a broader sense Victorian culture envisioned wedlock as a romance-based partnership wherein men and women complemented each other by operating in separate spheres. Still patriarchal in nature, the Victorian notion of womanhood beautified women's role in marriage by espousing female purity, conjugal love, and the nuclear family.²⁸ Critical to the Victorian woman's identity and perceived as the greatest moment in her life, the extravagant wedding functioned as a social reward and portal to her respectability.²⁹ The white wedding transformed the bride into a princess and glamorized her transition to the elevated role of wife.³⁰ The popularity of the white wedding exploded as American popular culture publicized this royal wedding and created the desire to emulate it.³¹ The "white wedding" symbolized purity, virginity, racial superiority, power, and privilege.

The Victorian era primed Americans to crave the white wedding, but it was largely the province of the wealthy upper class for a hundred years following Queen Victoria's wedding. During this period, many cultural developments influenced the expansion of the white wedding to include the average bride-to-be later in the twentieth

century. In the 1920s, American romantic consumer culture stimulated the development of the beauty industry, which turned marriage into a competition among women.³² Advertisers of many products, such as cosmetics, started appealing to women by using romance, weddings, and marriage to sell their products.³³ The face, hair, and figure of a woman became her centerpieces of beauty to attract prospective husbands. Wedding etiquette also emerged with the introduction of Emily Post's etiquette guide in 1922, which instructed women on proper manners, formalized wedding tradition, and instructed women on the ways to beautify themselves for the marriage market.³⁴ During the 1930s and 1940s, the bridal industry emerged as a set of interconnected professional services designed to aid the bride in her wedding planning. The bridal industry marketed perfection and associated it with all aspects of the wedding from the flowers to the honeymoon.³⁵ Another idea concocted by the bridal industry during the 1930s to capitalize on the "perfect wedding" craze involved the wedding gown. Bridal shops and department stores began advertising the wedding dress as a once-in-a-lifetime costume, which required distinction.³⁶ The emergence of the bridal industry and the perfect wedding imagery during this period, though not accessible to most brides, set the stage for the next period in wedding history.

The rise of the American middle class, combined with the cumulative effects of the budding consumer culture, turned the traditional white wedding into the standard template for brides in the 1950s.³⁷ Following World War II, a backlash against the feminist agitation of the preceding decades occurred and a neo-Victorian world emerged, reintroducing the notions of a strict separation of spheres and distinct gender roles.³⁸ Women reaffirmed the notions of passivity, submissiveness, and femininity, and the big

white wedding exemplified all of these cultural ideals.³⁹ Weddings once again celebrated the climax of a girl's life and her assumption of a new role as wife. In modern times, the traditional white wedding represents a throwback to the conservative cultures of the Victorian Era and the Neo-Victorian 1950s, despite over four decades of social progress toward bringing equality to women and marriage.

As the historical necessity of marriage diminishes and the realization that over half of all marriages end in divorce, the wedding industry relies on the indoctrination of the perfect, magical, once-in-a-lifetime wedding fantasy to mask contemporary problems with these rituals.⁴⁰ The capacity of dominant culture to overwhelm gains made in equality signifies the powerful appeal of romance and fantasy and the continued cultural significance of historical traditions. Demystifying ingrained beliefs about wedding rituals and generating alternative ones based on mutual respect and equality is increasingly complicated by the popular culture romanticization of white wedding traditions. Despite the overtly patriarchal gestures evident in the rituals of the American "white wedding," tradition maintains its cultural primacy, sustaining capitalistic interests, ruling class ideology, and compulsory gender conformity.

¹ Jaclyn Geller, *Here Comes the Bride: Women, Weddings, and the Marriage Mystique* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2001), 70.

² Chrys Ingraham, *Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 9.

³ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵ Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*, 7.

⁶ This statement reflects a broad understanding of women's historical roles in American culture. This idea is discussed heavily in Jaclyn Geller's, *Here Comes the Bride*, and Marilyn Yalom's, *A History of the Wife* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001).

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- ⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, *Inventing Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), Introduction.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.
- ⁹ Yalom, *A History of the Wife*, 1.
- ¹⁰ Geller, *Here Comes the Bride*, 24.
- ¹¹ Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of Love* (New York: Random House, 1994), 268.
- ¹² Yalom, *A History of the Wife*, 21.
- ¹³ Geller, *Here Comes the Bride*, 21.
- ¹⁴ Yalom, *A History of the Wife*, 43.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.
- ¹⁹ Lawrence Stone, *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500-1800* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 180-81.
- ²⁰ Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*, 30.
- ²¹ James Trager, *A Woman's Chronology* (New York: Henry Holt, 1994), 190.
- ²² Geller, *Here Comes the Bride*, 24.
- ²³ Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Women's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven: Yale University Press), 5, 77-78.
- ²⁴ Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*, 30.
- ²⁵ Elizabeth Pleck, *Celebrating the Family: Ethnicity, Consumer Culture, and Family Rituals* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), 208.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 208.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 211.
- ²⁸ Geller, *Here Comes the Bride*, 26.
- ²⁹ Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*, 7.
- ³⁰ Pleck, *Celebrating the Family*, 208.
- ³¹ Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*, 31.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 36, 39.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 36-37.
- ³⁴ Emily Post, *Etiquette in Society, in Business, in Politics and at Home* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1922).
- ³⁵ Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*, 42.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, chapter 1. A general theme in this book and specifically in this chapter is that lavish weddings have become an expression of conspicuous consumption and now all classes can buy the dream of a lavish wedding. They date the origins of the lavish wedding to the 1950s.
- ³⁸ Carol McD. Wallace, *All Dressed in White: The Irresistible Rise of the American Wedding* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004), 153.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁴⁰ Ingraham, *White Weddings*, 74.

Chapter Two: The Princess Bride Seduction

Dear Abby: I am a happily married 21-year-old woman. I eloped 2 years ago without informing my parents because I knew they would not approve. I planned to have a large family wedding later. "I have been planning my perfect wedding since I was 5."

-Married "Bride-To-Be"

Dear Abby column
St. Petersburg Times
August 21, 2004¹

While social history is responsible for shaping the patriarchal framework of contemporary weddings, popular culture is to blame for romanticizing white wedding traditions, which mask the racial, class, and gender inequalities that traditional weddings preserve. Wedding images permeate every facet of American culture, and the primary messages communicated focus on getting women ready for their role as brides. From all directions, popular culture reinforces that getting married is the pinnacle of a woman's life. From advertisements for teeth whitening, picturing a bride with her gleaming dental work, to popular women's magazines giving advice on how to "land the man of your dreams," the cultural obsession with weddings is apparent. The success of the traditional white wedding is a result of the mass media's ability to construct and propagate popular culture symbols and images through television, film, magazines, books, newspapers, radio, and the Internet, and to shape mainstream thinking about gender roles and weddings.²

Through the use of fairytale imagery, the wedding industry cleverly obscures the contradictory overtones of the traditional white wedding in modern society, by using romantic fantasy to drive bridal consumer culture and to naturalize an array of patriarchal wedding rituals. Although the rise of the lavish wedding dates back to late-nineteenth-century England, marketing of the fairytale imagery is crucial to securing consumption in

the current American wedding industry.³ Fairytales remain fashionable because they rely on the perceived potential of “happily ever after” rather than fulfillment in marriage, which creates an ideal environment for fantasy to flourish in popular culture images of weddings.

The wedding industry capitalizes on its ability to seduce female consumers into believing that the traditional wedding is both a right and essential for happiness and emotional fulfillment.⁴ American society implants in women the desire for a formal white wedding early in childhood, and wedding marketers happily prepare them for their eventual roles as the central figures in their future dream wedding. This seduction is so irresistible that women often imagine themselves as brides and envision their wedding day from the time they are very young girls. However, yearning for an elaborate white wedding is not an innate desire. Women are not born expecting to secure a sparkling two-carat diamond engagement ring, wear an elaborate white dress, and march down an aisle to their prince charming; society socializes them to prepare their entire lives for the experience.

The marketing of the fairytale fantasy targets all women and starts early in childhood in order to secure present and future consumption in the wedding industry. Wedding marketers use princess and bridal items to capture the attention of young girls. An array of products—from princess movies, Disney films and princess products, bridal and princess Barbie dolls, princess-themed items and parties, television shows and wedding roles—influence girls’ interpretation of gender roles and femininity. These playtime activities encourage girls to envision themselves as brides, which is the apex of the princess fantasy. When a bride invites a young child to be her flower girl, she often

has the younger girl wear a fairytale princess dress to match her dress. This role allows younger girls to fantasize about their future role as a princess bride while they are mini-princess-brides for the day.

Society constructs many gender characteristics; children, thus, assimilate naturally into what popular culture deems as appropriate and expected playtime behavior. A walk down the Barbie pink "girl" aisle of any toy department illustrates the limited vision of proper female play activities. Princess toys and *Barbie* Dolls are the main attractions; there are few alternatives to these pervasive kinds of playthings. Girls are bombarded with options to play out culturally induced female fantasies. Items such as fairy princess dress-up clothes (including tiaras and make-up), dress-up kits with princess, queen, bride and bridesmaid costumes, my-size princess Barbie (a 3 ft Barbie that includes a wedding gown for girls to wear), Bridal *Barbie*, and Disney princess kits saturate the aisles. Other merchandise plastered with the princess imagery includes clothes, bicycles, umbrellas, slippers, bedroom sleep sets, and even educational games. In contrast, the "boys" department is devoid of wedding and fairytale toys; boys have no prince or groom dress-up toys filling up their section. Although some toy stores do sell the Ken groom doll, this doll is found in the girl's aisle and is not meant as a boy's toy. This sends a clear message to impressionable young girls about gender conformity, while it encourages boys to pursue individualistic and constructive activities.

Princess mania reaches far beyond the toy store, however. Hit films such as the *Princess Diaries*, *Ella Enchanted*, and *The Prince and Me* also cater to the princess craze. While the female characters in these stories appear more assertive than past princess fairytales, the basic tenets of princess behavior resonate throughout these films.⁵ Another

trend in princess mania is the emergence of princess parties. Following the release of the film *The Princess Diaries 2: Royal Engagement*, Disney offered Princess Tea Parties at the El Capitan theatre in Hollywood for girls to indulge in princess play. Girls were able to mingle with Disney princesses while sipping tea and rotating around dress-up stations to model wedding dresses, tiaras, and veils for their mothers who excitedly posed their little brides for pictures.⁶ In a March 2004 *USA Today* article, "Princesses Rule the Hearts of Little Girls," journalist Gary Strauss elaborates on what he terms, "the princessing of America." Strauss describes the recent boom in the popularity of princesses and focuses on the appeal of princess parties with themes such as prettiest princess. He quotes an editor from *Parents* magazine as saying, "There's something in the genetic imprint of girls that makes them want to be princesses," while he quotes a mother as saying, "Playing princess is what being a little girl is all about."⁷ Such articles reinforce the notion that fantasy maintains a powerful stronghold on our culture and especially on girls, but more notably this perspective reflects a conscious desire on the part of female role models to limit the development of young girls and perpetuate essentialist views of women. In addition to the social implications of gender-specific fantasy play, there are enormous economic consequences as well. The Disney Corporation, which is one of the nation's largest media conglomerates, grossed \$1.3 billion dollars in 2003 alone, with the princess products jumping 1,200% since their introduction to the market in 2000.⁸

Fairytales tantalize girls of all ages with the notions of Prince Charming and happily-ever-after romances. While the current obsession with princess brides and fairytale weddings seems fairly new, fairytales actually began in the 1600s in Europe.

Charles Perrault published the first popular fairytale, *Cinderella*, in 1679.⁹ Various versions of the *Cinderella* story have emerged since then, but the Perrault story remained the most widely accepted version due to the belief that a passive female protagonist would be more appealing.¹⁰ The popularity of the “happily-ever-after” theme of *Cinderella* spawned numerous movies, plays, and children’s books, becoming interwoven into American popular culture during the 20th Century. In their book *Cinderella Dreams: The Allure of the Lavish Wedding*, Historian Elizabeth Pleck and co-author Cele Otnes explain that American society has a unique connection with the *Cinderella* theme, in their book. They compare *Cinderella*’s rags-to-riches story as a symbol of the American dream.¹¹ They do not, however, allude to the fact that *Cinderella* gains upward mobility by marrying a prince, not by achieving personal success.

Walt Disney revived the *Cinderella* story in the 1950s, and created other notable fairytale classics such as *Snow White* and *Sleeping Beauty*. His female characters embodied many cultural ideals reflective of 1950s ideas such as passivity and the significance of image.¹² The Disney Corporation also developed an assortment of princess-related products for girls such as toys, dolls, cartoons, Golden Press storybooks, and clothes.¹³ In her 1994 book, *Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female with the Mass Media*, American Studies professor Susan J. Douglas contends that Walt Disney’s intention for his female characters was not harmless, innocent fun.¹⁴ She argues that Walt Disney was a right-wing conservative who intended to reinforce sex-role stereotypes in his fantasy stories by deliberately exaggerating certain assumptions about women and gender roles.¹⁵ At the same time fairytales grew in popularity in the 1950s, the *Cinderella* theme became a widespread symbol for brides to emulate for their

weddings.¹⁶

Another cultural icon emerged in the 1950s, helping to promote the popularity of traditional weddings and to ensure future consumption in the wedding industry. In 1959, Mattel cofounder Ruth Handler introduced the *Barbie* doll, which similar to the Disney Princess characters, represented the cultural ideals of beauty and appropriate femininity. The *Barbie* doll eventually turned into the most popular doll in history.¹⁷ *Barbie* was a white, blonde, blue-eyed, thin, and beautiful doll, who possessed extremely unnatural bodily dimensions. After the introduction of the doll, Mattel released the *Barbie* "Wedding Day Set," later that year and life-size *Barbie* in 1962, which featured 8 outfits, including a wedding dress.¹⁸ Since her inception, *Barbie* has played many roles, but the wedding and princess-themed *Barbie* products remain the most common type available in toy stores.¹⁹ The attraction to *Barbie* products includes non-white girls as well, who wish to imitate the dominant cultural image of the beautiful white doll. While *Barbie* dolls exist depicting other races, the facial and body characteristics are invariably similar to the main white *Barbie*, sending a message of assimilation rather than acceptance and recognition of racial diversity.²⁰

The marketing of bridal and princess items by Disney, Mattel, and other toy companies, the princess-themed movies, and the princess parties initiate the infusion of the wedding industry into the minds and hearts of little girls. As girls grow into women, the realization of these childhood dreams begins to take shape as *The Bachelor* and *Cosmopolitan* replace *Barbie* dolls and princess parties. The powerful and compelling messages concerning femininity and the role of weddings in a woman's life persist, but shift from toys and make-believe to wedding television shows and bridal magazines. The

culturally-constructed visual media reflect and reproduce the images necessary to bolster tradition and secure consumption of very costly products and services provided by the wedding industry.²¹ Films, television, and women's magazines utilize romantic illusions and fantasy to propel the wedding industry and to conceal the hierarchical social order.

The cultural obsession with weddings suggests the power of the capitalistic ruling class to exploit the socially-generated fantasy of most American women, which is to be the central attraction of a perfect white wedding. Popular culture outlets depict women as wedding-hungry maniacs who will gladly relinquish personal ambitions in order to attract a husband and acquire a ring, a process which naturalizes female passivity and downplays women's interests beyond marriage. A major source of this capitalist patriarchal pattern is the Walt Disney Corporation. This mass media giant plays a key part in the socialization of children and adults alike, with its vast influence over the media. The Disney Corporation is not merely the producer of fairytale movies or the owner of several theme parks; the corporation owns many media subsidiaries with combined revenues averaging 25 billion dollars per year.²² Their company holdings include the ABC Television network, Touchstone Pictures, ESPN, Lifetime, and several women's magazines and daily newspapers.²³

Over the years, the Walt Disney Corporation created a lucrative primary and secondary wedding market as a result of its media consolidation, thus contributing to white weddings becoming culturally ubiquitous. Disney production companies successfully produced many wedding-movie blockbusters such as *Father of the Bride*. Wedding movies and wedding shows such as ABC's *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*, and Lifetime's *I Do Diaries* and *Weddings of a Lifetime* all perpetuate the wedding craze

and increase the desire, demand, and the market for white weddings. Inspired by the success of their animated fairytale classics, the Disney Corporation created fairytale weddings to indulge brides at Disneyland and Disney World. For roughly the amount of an average middle-class person's yearly salary (between \$20,000 and \$55,000), a bride can play out her life-long fantasy of being a princess bride marrying her prince charming.²⁴ In the "Ultimate Fairytale Wedding," which costs a mere \$100,000, a bride can ride down Main Street in Magic Kingdom in a horse-drawn carriage to meet her Prince, who waits on horseback to take her off to Cinderella's castle for their honeymoon.²⁵

In addition to the socializing forces of the Disney Corporation, many other popular culture influences drive the traditional white wedding propaganda machine. Typically, television networks use weddings to highlight a show's season or as a series finale, but now romance-themed reality shows ending with an engagement and wedding, dominate network programming. Shows culminating in happily-ever-after endings are major ratings grabbers, thus many television networks have developed reality and documentary shows of this genre to exploit the cultural fascination with romantic fantasy. On cable networks, wedding shows like TLC's *Wedding Story*, *Perfect Proposal*, and *For Better or Worse*, entice aspiring brides-to-be with their formulaic plots and laborious displays of emotion.²⁶ The WE channel airs reality-based bridal shows such as *Bride vs. Bride*, *Platinum Weddings*, and *Bridezilla* to dramatize the emotional and financial tolls of achieving a fairytale dream wedding.²⁷

Major television networks premiere shows like ABC's *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*, NBC's *Race to the Altar*, and Fox's various reality shows such as *Who*

Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire?, *Joe Millionaire*, and *My Big Fat Obnoxious Fiancé*. While slightly different in concept, the premise of these shows is invariably similar. *The Bachelor*, *Who Wants to Marry a Multi-Millionaire*, and *Joe Millionaire* all feature a cast of adult women, from various social and economic backgrounds, who compete for the affections (or in some cases the money) of a man they barely know. The ultimate goal of these shows was to reward one woman with an engagement ring and a man who would provide for her emotionally and financially. Upon completion of the first installment of *The Bachelor*, Fox created the spin-off show *The Bachelorette*, to dramatize Trista's (the runner-up from *The Bachelor*) failure to win the coveted ring, and the new show offered her a second chance at love, a ring, and a wedding. At the conclusion of the first season of *The Bachelorette*, Trista finally found love and won her Prince Charming (Ryan). At the climax of the final episode, Ryan asks Trista's father for her hand in marriage, viewed by Trista and most of the show's audience as a respectful and deeply romantic act, rather than a throwback to the overtly patriarchal tradition of exchanging a woman as a commodity between father and groom-to-be. ABC sensationalized their union to the fullest by broadcasting their ostentatious white fairytale wedding as well as follow-up shows glamorizing their happily-ever-after lives following the wedding.

Consistent with the wedding trend evident on television, Hollywood also caters to the wedding craze by routinely releasing movies with wedding, bridal, or fairytale themes. Many popular movies were released over the last several years like *My Best Friend's Wedding*, *Polish Wedding*, *Muriel's Wedding*, *Runaway Bride*, *The Wedding Planner*, *In and Out*, *The Wedding Singer*, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, *American*

Wedding, *Maid in Manhattan*, *The Wedding Date*, *The Wedding Crashers*, and *Monster-In-Law* all emphasize the primacy of weddings in American culture. In the hit movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*, many outright sexist themes are overlooked because of the movie's use of romance, tradition, and the happily-ever-after ending to manipulate the storyline. The female lead (Toula) is a drab 30-year-old woman bored with her husbandless life. Her father, the family patriarch, rules the house and her life, stating on several occasions the danger in educating women. In the end, she marries a man who rescues her from her mundane life and the audience is left to believe that they lived happily-ever-after. This very popular movie naturalizes women's subservient place in the family, legitimizes the patriarchal behavior of the father, and devalues the notion of women having personal goals.

Magazines are another advertising tool the wedding industry uses to market the white wedding fantasy to aspiring brides. On the magazine rack, there is no shortage of material advising women on ways to make their men commit, how to get the engagement ring you want, and how to plan the perfect storybook wedding. Popular bookstores, such as Barnes & Noble and Borders, dedicate entire aisles to trendy women's magazines, not to mention the space they allot to wedding etiquette and planning books. The overarching themes of love, romance, and marriage dominate the articles, polls, and advice columns in the pages of these magazines. A recent article in *Cosmopolitan*, "Seal the Deal and Make Him Commit," illustrates the way popular culture naturalizes and perpetuates anachronistic gender roles. The authors of this article want women to know that securing male commitment is hard work and worthy of your undivided attention: "Getting the man that you want to propose and then turning that proposal into a wedding

date can be a tougher deal to close than a media merger.” However, they also inform readers that engagements should only be male-initiated: “If you are involved with a man for several years who isn’t proposing, how much longer are you willing to wait?”²⁸ They skip the important topics of relationship building, blatantly ignore contemporary marriage problems, and advocate the overly romanticized proposal scene without regard to the profound implications of telling women to be passive participants in the planning of their own lives.

The patriarchal traditions of the white wedding persist in American society due to the popular culture influence over the construction of gender roles. From a young age, women are groomed by society to prepare their whole lives for their future weddings. In childhood, princess toys and animated movies inundate girls with messages about expected gender roles and the importance of getting married, while television, movies, and magazines, socialize adult women to expect and crave all the trimmings of this well-developed fantasy. The ability of the mass media to perpetuate inculcated beliefs about gender and tradition and to gain overwhelming consent to a ritual that perpetuates race, class, and gender hierarchies illustrates the power of the dominant social order.

¹ Dear Abbey Column, *St. Petersburg Times*, 21 August 2004.

² Ingraham, *White Weddings*, 73, 84.

³ Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*, 26.

⁴ Vicki Howard, “American Weddings: Gender, Consumption, and the Business of Brides” (Ph.D. Diss, University of Texas, 2000), 61.

⁵ Tim Hunter, “The Princess Syndrome.” In *NewsBreak* (online newspaper), 21 Aug. 2004, <http://www.theage.com.au/articles>, (accessed, September 16, 2004).

⁶ Mouse Planet Online, <http://www.mouseplanet.com>, (accessed, September 19, 2004).

⁷ Gary Strauss, “Princesses Rule the Hearts of Little Girls,” *USA Today*, 2 March 2004, sec D, 1-2.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2 and Ingraham, *White Weddings*, 65.

⁹ Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*, 27.

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- ¹⁰ Ibid., 27.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 28.
- ¹² Ibid., 46.
- ¹³ Ibid.
- ¹⁴ Susan J. Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing up Female with the Mass Media*, (New York: Random House, 1994), 27-31.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 27.
- ¹⁶ McD Wallace, *All Dressed in White*, 168.
- ¹⁷ Ingraham, *White Weddings*, 94; Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*, 49.
- ¹⁸ Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*, 47; Kitturah B. Westenhouser, *The Story of Barbie*, (Paducah, KY.: Collector Books, 1994), 32.
- ¹⁹ The wedding/bridal/princess *Barbies* are the most prevalent type of *Barbie* doll at toy stores and in toy departments. I visited several stores to make this assessment.
- ²⁰ Ingraham, *White Weddings*, 97.
- ²¹ Ibid., 127-128.
- ²² PBS Online, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/cool/giants/disney.html>, (accessed, October 20, 2004).
- ²³ Ibid.
- ²⁴ Disney Weddings Online, http://disneyweddings.go.com/site/wed/cus/rec/com_quest.jsp, (accessed, November 28, 2007).
- ²⁵ Melissa Morrison, "Bridal Wave: The New Wedding Frenzy is About Everything but the Marriage," *Bitch 25* (Summer 2004), 25-26, 94-95.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 25.
- ²⁷ Troy Patterson, "Bride TV: Two ways to Look at Marriage on WE," In *Slate* (online magazine). 18 Aug. 2006 <http://www.slate.com/id/2147493/?GT1=8483>. (accessed, November 28, 2007).
- ²⁸ "Seal the Deal and Make Him Commit." In *Cosmopolitan* [online magazine], <http://www.cosmopolitan.com/sex-love/dating/seal-the-deal>, (accessed, November 28, 2007).

Chapter Three: Will You Marry Me?

Yes, you have to get down on one knee and ask her to marry you. It's very important. Believe me, her mother and friends will ask her if you got down on one knee . . . It's the whole Prince Charming rigmarole.

John Mitchell,
What the Hell is a Groom, 1999¹

The rituals of the traditional white wedding in mainstream American culture officially begin with the engagement. This period lasts an average of thirteen months and includes many pre-wedding activities designed solely for female participation and conspicuous consumption leading up to the bride's "big day." Despite the gains made for women's rights, such as increased social and professional mobility and legal protections in marriage, most women still consciously choose to participate in wedding rituals that reflect patriarchal bias and naturalize gender conformity. The white wedding fantasy socializes women to crave idealized engagement customs such as male-initiated proposals, betrothal rings, and bridal showers, which preserve patriarchal social norms and leave the influence of "tradition" unchecked. Irrespective of race, class, age, or professional status, the majority of modern brides excitedly participate in engagement rituals that foster traditional views of women and gender expectations in marriage.

Most women partake in wedding rituals simply to uphold tradition, without realizing their historical function or the contemporary implications of viewing matrimony's past with a nostalgic perspective. From the Victorian era until a few decades ago, the betrothal period served as a time for the bride to accumulate household goods and for the groom to purchase a home and prepare for his financial responsibilities as provider.² Women's lives changed most significantly in marriage; thus, engagement rituals revolved around the bride to celebrate her change in social status. Historian Ellen

Rothman contends that in the Victorian era, weddings were critical to the identity of a woman, and the lavish white wedding served as a reward for the years of sacrifice a woman made for her husband and children.³ In contemporary society, as in Victorian times, weddings are touted as the pinnacle of a woman's life. Although weddings cease to function as remunerative rewards for women entering marriage, the central role of the bride, as well as the validation of traditional gender roles, such as women gaining social respectability at the announcement of an engagement, remains strikingly similar to that of the past. Modern engagements include an insidious mix of romanticized patriarchal practices of the past combined with the capitalistic interests of the present.

The decision to take a relationship to the next level remains in the jurisdiction of men, while aspiring brides anxiously wait for their partners to "pop the question." Consistent with the cultural ideal, a man must present his female partner with a diamond engagement ring in order to display his romantic panache and satisfy her deeply rooted need for the "Prince Charming fantasy."⁴ The formulaic proposal is a culturally honored ritual reminiscent of medieval times when noble women temporarily assumed supreme power over men during the courting process.⁵ The expectation of male-initiated proposals appears in all areas of popular culture. Movies, television shows, magazines, bridal etiquette books, and Internet sites inundate viewers with messages reinforcing appropriate gender behavior concerning proposals. The authors of *Your Day, Your Way: The Essential Handbook for the 21st-century Bride*, praise the man who takes the traditional approach to proposals: "If your groom is a traditionalist (and don't we love those!), he may have created a romantic proposal scene, dropped down to one knee, and

asked you to marry him.”⁶ Groom expert Peter Nelson asserts that although some “modern” women feel equally able to propose, male initiative remains favorable.

Customarily, purchasing the engagement ring and proposing are the essential tasks of the groom during the engagement period. As compared to the large quantity of wedding guides available to brides online and in the wedding sections of bookstores and libraries, only a few wedding primers exist to guide the male suitor through the maze of matrimony. Groom manuals serve as socializing mechanisms, comparable to bride’s magazines and etiquette books. They typically focus on the proposal scene, the engagement ring, and the passive role of the groom during wedding planning. Advice to grooms usually includes an explanation of the importance of weddings to the bride-to-be: “Always keep in mind that your fiancée has been dreaming about being a bride and playing ‘dress up’ bride since she was a little girl. You’re the man of her dreams and the one she wants to make her dreams come true. So get ready, Prince Charming!”⁷ Groom guides also offer tips on dealing with the bride’s obsession with planning the perfect wedding: “Listen, she’s talking and dreaming about it. If you want to play it safe, just sit there and listen. Offer your ideas and advice. She’ll never fully understand why this wedding isn’t as big a deal to you as it is to her. Don’t even try to explain.”⁸ These types of assumptions magnify the cultural perception that getting married is the high point of a woman’s life and perpetuate the view that women are incapable of viewing the female experience in any other way.

Groom guides such as Michael Perry’s satirical book, *The Groom’s Survival Manual*, make no attempt to modify traditional wedding practices or to question the automatic adherence to outdated customs; they merely offer recommendations for grooms

in the existing wedding framework, which revolves around the bride-to-be: "The over-ambitious groom needs to guard against becoming too involved; there is a fine line between taking part and getting in the way. The traditional wedding is hosted primarily by the bride's family, and the bride is the center of attention. Although many couples take charge of their own weddings, and others split up duties along non-traditional lines, it's still likely that your bride wants this to be *her* day."⁹ Similarly, Peter Nelson's groom guide, *Marry Like a Man*, offers advice for the "Post-Feminist-New-Age" groom-to-be.¹⁰ He not only conveys the importance of etiquette and tradition by asserting that "a wedding ceremony is laden with tradition, and traditions are there for a reason," but also eases the anxiety of his male audience by acknowledging his own indifference to standard wedding protocol with his mocking tone: "I do not, personally care a great deal about etiquette and would rather make my own rules as I go along,"¹¹ Despite such inconsistencies in the explanation of wedding norms, groom guides overwhelmingly advise adherence to tradition, leaving little reason for men to question the continued validity of antiquated wedding rituals in contemporary society.

In contrast to the utopian view of marriage advanced by the wedding industry in bridal literature, manuals written for grooms always address the fears and uncertainties of getting married. If male readers get past the counseling session and decide to move to the next step, these guides instruct them on all critical components of buying the engagement ring and avoiding disappointment when proposing. The diamond ring is the central prop that jumpstarts the wedding fantasy and represents the asymmetrical nature of the engagement, as there is no outward symbol for the engaged man. *Marry Like a Man* trivializes the historical weight of this tradition with the facetious comment, "Of course,

men, being the possessive, insecure little wieners that we are, want our brides to be more conspicuously unavailable than us.”¹² Groom guides also dictate that purchasing a ring is an absolute necessity. Peter Nelson insists that all women desire engagement rings and asserts that even the most ardent feminist succumbs to the impulse of showing off her “rock” when she becomes engaged.¹³ All bridal keepsake journals include a section for the bride to document the proposal and how she felt when she gazed upon her sparkling engagement ring for the first time, a sign of the accuracy of this assessment. Bridal etiquette books invariably advocate and romanticize the patriarchal tradition of presenting engagement rings and proposing, while indirectly referencing the influence of feminism, to appear progressive without jeopardizing traditionalism. Some suggest that the groom include his partner when purchasing the ring: “Today’s groom is actually quite practical and considerate. He wants to allow his bride the chance to choose her own ring, to pick the stone shape and setting design that she loves, instead of one he thinks will work. This is an excellent approach for independent women, and we applaud it!”¹⁴ Altering social norms regarding engagement rituals is limited to including women in the process of choosing an engagement ring rather than questioning the convention itself.

American popular culture and the wedding industry distort the original significance of the betrothal ring-which historically functioned as the pledge of the bride’s father to transfer ownership of his daughter to the groom-into a symbol of the groom’s love and devotion. Betrothal rings first appeared in ancient Roman times as simple, gem-less bands made of iron, used to mark women as property.¹⁵ In medieval times, the ring signified the groom’s vow to marry and the bride’s promise to remain chaste.¹⁶ By the fifteenth century, diamond wedding rings began appearing at royal

weddings as a sign of the bride's privileged upper-class status.¹⁷ The discovery of diamonds in South Africa in the 1870s increased the availability of the gem, which spawned the creation of the ever-popular Tiffany ring in American society and increased the desire for the diamond engagement ring.¹⁸ The marketing of diamonds as a symbol of love began in the 1920s when De Beers secured a monopoly in the diamond mining industry. Advertising campaigns began targeting the average man to convince him that buying an engagement ring was a necessity and symbolized his love for his future bride.¹⁹ De Beers continued its psychological marketing strategy throughout the twentieth-century, using such popular slogans as "A diamond is forever," which firmly planted the tradition of diamond engagement rings in the minds of the American public.

During the 1960s, De Beers introduced the four C's: Cut, clarity, color, and carat, to standardize the diamond buying process, a campaign still seen in contemporary bridal magazines, groom guides, and jewelry advertisements.²⁰ Wedding marketers pressure prospective grooms into purchasing the right size ring to satisfy social expectations: "Your bride's friends will all want to see her rock once she tells them she's engaged. Your bride will be happier to have her friends 'ooh and aaah' loudly than hear them sigh or say, 'Oh, what a dear *little* ring'."²¹ The average expenditure for an engagement ring has soared in recent years to \$4,146.00, a sharp rise from the 1996 average of \$3,000.00, signifying the ability of popular culture to market this message.²² Jewelry advertisements saturate the pages of bridal magazines with messages linking the perfect engagement ring to the perfect wedding and marriage. An advertisement for Scott Kay jewelry appearing in *Modern Bride* uses romantic notions to enchant buyers into looking past the cost when

selecting an engagement ring: "Never compromise when asking someone to spend the rest of their life with you."²³

After the groom purchases the ring and prepares to propose, wedding protocol directs the engaged couple to the bride's parents. Since the traditional white wedding represents a symbolic expression of the woman's social transformation into wife, etiquette dictates that her parents learn of the news first. Wedding handbooks written for brides and grooms routinely espouse the retrograde act of the groom privately discussing his intentions with the bride's father (both of the bride's parents are occasionally considered) despite the contention by authors Cele Otnes and Elizabeth Pleck in *Cinderella Dreams* that the custom is dying out due to the impact of feminism.²⁴ They remark that "as late as 1969, Emily Post's etiquette protocol mandated that the groom should ask the bride's father for her hand."²⁵ Indeed, Peggy Post's book, *Emily Post's Weddings*, still bolsters this custom thirty years after Otnes and Pleck claim the tradition started to fade away: "Although it may seem old-fashioned, it is still courteous for the prospective groom to explain his plans and his prospects to the bride's parents, as evidence of his respect for them."²⁶ The authors of *Your Day, Your Way*, published in 2003, also depict the gesture as charming and quaint with their idealized claim that "There is beauty in the tradition of your fiancé asking for your hand in marriage."²⁷ Similarly, John Mitchell's groom advisor, *What the Hell is a Groom and What's He Supposed to Do?*, suggests honoring this matrimonial custom: "You may be wondering about asking her father for her hand in marriage. I believe that asking her father is admirable, and shows concern for tradition and for her family."²⁸ Advice of this type brazenly disregards female independence, individualism, and agency; yet, the practice

remains sentimentalized by marriage propagandists as a symbol of respect and courtesy. Discussing their plans and intentions with both sets of parents represents a more respectful gesture, but a suggestion of this type rarely appears in the pages of etiquette guides

With ring in hand, the groom must next plan an elaborate proposal, often with expensive props and unique settings, to satisfy the alleged feminine craving for romance and chivalry. Popular culture socializes women to expect dramatic proposals replete with elements of both surprise and meticulous planning and pressures men to comply with these wishes. A recent article appearing on the website, E-Zine articles, illustrates this view: "In a recent study the majority of married women believe that their spouse spent a significant amount of money on their wedding proposal but that the lack of originality in the proposal had left the women feeling disappointed."²⁹ The proposal scene also reflects a peculiar irony. At the sight of a kneeling suitor, women usually appear taken off guard, displaying a sense of shock, disorientation, and inarticulate bliss at the sight of a ring, despite the hard work and perseverance likely exerted to secure this commitment.³⁰ The societal reverence bestowed upon the betrothal ring eclipses its historical legacy of male entitlement and ownership; thus, women excitedly anticipate the male-initiated proposal and proudly flaunt their rings as feminine badges of honor. The compulsion to conform to this ritual drives the wedding industry and propagates indoctrinated views of proper male and female behavior.

American society touts marriage as the primary objective for women and endorses the wedding rituals that strengthen this perspective. Mainstream norms convey the message that an engagement represents the most climactic time in a woman's life.³¹ As a

result, the bride and her family disseminate the news of her engagement in various ways: Announcing the engagement and wedding in newsprint, hosting an engagement party, and sending out save-the-date cards and wedding invitations. Wedding custom designates the bride's parents as responsible for announcing the engagement in the newspaper and hosting any engagement parties, though etiquette books give no explanation as to the reason for this practice other than referencing it as "proper." Etiquette suggests that couples are free to decide how costs are divvied up, but always break down the expenses according to tradition; the bride and her family are listed as responsible for the majority of the costs. In her examination of weddings in *All Dressed in White: The Irresistible Rise of the American Wedding*, Carol McD. Wallace contends that this tradition stems from the notion that the groom's family paying for any part of the wedding obligated the bride, and her only commodity—her virginity—to her prospective groom.³²

Standard engagement announcements, wedding announcements, and wedding invitations exhibit one or more forms of overt gender inequality. Announcements usually follow the etiquette guidelines of describing the parents of the bride and groom in androcentric language.

*Mr. and Mrs. William Smith of Evanston, Illinois announce
the engagement of their daughter Miss Christine Nicole Smith to Mr. John Paul
Rapaglia, son of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Rapaglia.*³³

The announcement fuses the mother's name into the social identity of her husband; her name appears independently only when she is divorced or widowed. Another notable aspect of the naming practices involves the use of "Miss" when identifying the bride's name, to publicize her never-been-married status. The groom's ambiguous title of "Mr." remains static throughout his life irrespective of his marital

history, but the bride's marital status remains socially pertinent. Only in the case of a divorce or delayed marriage does a woman gain the appellation of "Ms." In 1986, *The New York Times* underscored the social significance of marriage for women by adopting the practice of using the term "Miss" or "Mrs." in published wedding announcements if the marital status of the bride was known, while applying "Ms." when this information was unknown.³⁴ Another notable point is a woman's choice to keep her maiden name rather than assume her husband's surname. Newspapers routinely inquire whether the bride will retain her maiden name socially or professionally. A recent announcement in *The New York Times* Sunday Style section noted the bride's intention to keep her name before giving any other descriptive information about her: "Ms. Boyle, 38, is keeping her name. She is an associate publisher at Simon & Schuster in New York."³⁵ This downplays her professional and social identity to highlight her non-conformist choice of keeping her name. Marriage primers advise brides to disclose their intentions if they decide to keep their name, often in a critical or guilt-inducing tone: "Confusion often prevails when the bride decides to retain her maiden name or some hyphenated form of both her and her husband's name. If you decide to go the nontraditional route, you will need to graciously inform those who assume you will be taking your husband's name as your own."³⁶ Wedding invitations feature similar language to announcements. Irrespective of which party hosts the wedding, wedding professionals offer similar advice on the appropriate wording of invitations. As with announcements, androcentric titles are used to describe the bride's parents, and the bride's name frequently loses its appellation, while the groom's name appears formal. A typical announcement might read:

*Mr. and Mrs. John Smith
Request the honour of your presence
at the marriage of their daughter Marybeth*

to
Mr. Steven Chase

The popularity of printed engagement announcements has diminished in recent years, thus many couples reveal their plans to marry during an engagement party. Historically, the bride's father hosted an engagement party to celebrate his daughter's social transformation and to validate the union with a toast to the couple.³⁷ As the social necessity of this practice faded, the wedding industry revived the tradition as an opportunity to profit from the contemporary wedding craze. The engagement party offers another occasion for such wedding-related expenses as hosting the party and purchasing gifts for the engaged couple. Etiquette connoisseur Peggy Post affirms this notion with her judgment concerning engagement gifts: "Engagement gifts have never been obligatory . . . however, inviting guests specifically to an engagement party carries with it the implication that a gift is expected."³⁸ Wedding website theknot.com recommends that couples start their gift registries prior to the engagement party, but stress the inappropriateness of personally disclosing any details about it.³⁹ Registry etiquette affords retailers an opportunity to further gain from wedding-related spending without modifying the traditions that fuel its popularity.

After receiving the coveted engagement ring and spreading the news, the bride-to-be devotes the remainder of the engagement period to choreographing every detail of her well-developed wedding fantasy and participating in the female-centered rituals of attending bridal showers, creating bridal registries, and shopping for bridal attire. Since the American public regards the wedding day as the bride's day and believes that women are, by nature, better consumers and more concerned with the details, wedding retailers consider the bride, not the couple, the wedding planner and consumer. Bridal magazines,

wedding planners, wedding websites, bridal expos, and bridal registries all cater to the bride. The multi-billion dollar wedding industry serves vast capitalist interests by marketing a myriad of nuptial necessities, all promising to fulfill bridal dreams of magic and romantic fantasy. Bridal retailers amass large profits by exploiting the feminine desire for the perfect white wedding and imposing the ideal of aesthetic perfection upon the female psyche. Retailers manipulate consumers by adding the word “wedding” or “bridal” to items to increase their cost and linking emotional fulfillment with product consumption.⁴⁰ This fails to deter brides, however, who succumb to the romanticized rhetoric of the bridal industry and spend an average of \$27,000.00 to secure “the wedding of their dreams.”⁴¹ In recent years the insurance industry even tapped into the market to capitalize on the commercialization of weddings, offering insurance policies to safeguard couples against unforeseen wedding mishaps.

In addition to the asymmetrical gender experience of wedding planning, the images presented by the wedding industry reflect a racial and class bias. Sociologist Chrys Ingraham remarks in her book, *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture*, that “the American wedding represents a ritual by, for, and about the white middle to upper class.”⁴² Popular bridal magazines, *Bride’s* and *Modern Bride*, feature white models in their advertisements. Among the small percentage of non-white models appearing in these publications, women of color are characteristically light-skinned and set back in advertisements as bridesmaids.⁴³ The blonde-haired, blue-eyed bride remains the icon of feminine beauty, dominating the cover of all bridal magazines except *Signature Bride*.⁴⁴ In the November/December 2004 issue of *Bridal Guide*, 105 white models adorned the pages of this magazine before an advertisement featuring a

small photo of a plus-size African-American bride appeared.⁴⁵ Another popular culture outlet for the ideological creation of wedding norms is wedding reality shows, which disproportionately highlight middle-to-upper middle-class white couples, who can afford elaborate wedding spectacles.⁴⁶

The lack of racial diversity exhibited by the wedding industry and the mass media sends a distinct message about the racial dimensions of white wedding traditions, but fails to dissuade non-white couples from assimilating the discriminatory tenets of the big white wedding. Ironically, other marginalized groups such as gays and lesbians also imitate traditional wedding rituals to gain a sense of normalcy despite the social stigma and legal illegitimacy of their unions. An article on therawstory.com contends that fairytale weddings remain a popular dream in the gay community.⁴⁷ In response to this trend, retailers concocted the capitalistic practice of promoting fairytale-themed wedding products and services on gay and lesbian wedding directories and extending wedding gift registries to same-sex couples.

Planning an elaborate white wedding involves coordinating the services of a diverse array of wedding specialists, but shopping for bridal attire is undoubtedly the most climactic aspect of wedding planning for the bride. Since the "white wedding" accentuates traditional gender roles, the bride's gown is the focal point of the wedding. The white wedding gown and veil remain the standard costume of American brides, despite their origin as symbols of upper-class privilege, white superiority, female modesty, and sexual purity. Wedding retailers market the white wedding gown as a magical, once-in-a-lifetime dress with the power to transform an ordinary woman into a princess. In her essay "Unraveling the Knot: Hegemony, Gender, and Weddings in Mass

Media,” communications professor Erika Engstrom analyzes several episodes of the hit wedding reality show *Real Weddings from the Knot*. She observed that most brides admired themselves while trying on dresses, frequently commenting that they looked and felt like princesses.⁴⁸ The founders of *David's Bridal*, one of the largest retailers of bridal products in the United States, embraced the concept that every American bride deserves to feel like royalty on her wedding day and successfully market this message to brides who spend an average of eight hundred dollars on their on their dresses and an equal amount on bridal accessories such as shoes, tiaras or headpieces, jewelry, and undergarments.⁴⁹

Trying on wedding gowns evokes a highly emotional reaction from engaged women, who imagine the day when all eyes will be on them as they walk down the aisle. Bridal gown advertisers create a love affair between bride and gown in the pages of bridal magazines. Supermarkets and bookstores feature a dozen different bridal publications with hundreds of pages of wedding gown advertisements, which seek to awaken and stir the feminine fantasy for the traditional white wedding. Brides-to-be affix such a sacred value to this tangible wedding artifact that they often locate their gowns in a hierophantic experience; the perfect dress just materializes.⁵⁰ As part of the traditional white wedding fantasy, bridal culture glosses over the historical legacy of the white wedding costume and propagates a classist, racist, and sexist tradition. The wedding industry blurs the significance of the past and offers alternative explanations for the symbolism of “white wedding” artifacts like the white wedding dress, in order to secure consent to the tradition and continued consumption of expensive wedding industry products.

In addition to finding her wedding gown, choosing colors for flowers, bridesmaid's dresses, napkins, and tuxedos, and coordinating the services of florists, disc jockeys, pastry chefs, reception halls, limousine companies, hair salons, and catering companies, the bride also partakes in another female rite of passage—the bridal shower. Bridal showers first appeared in urban areas in the 1890s as informal female parties hosted by the bride's family or close female friends in order to celebrate her impending nuptials.⁵¹ From its inception, the bridal shower endorsed traditional views of women as guardians of the domestic sphere.⁵² During the bridal shower of the early-twentieth century, well-wishers opened a Japanese parasol over the bride and "showered" her with gifts such as cooking utensils and linens to set up her household.⁵³ The shower honored the bride's elevated social status and her assumption of a new role as wife, a title implying her multiple duties as cook, housekeeper, and homemaker.

Despite its origin as a ritualized form of gender conformity, the bridal shower remains a compulsory custom expected by today's bride. The modern shower incorporates features of the past combined with new trendy elements and usually follows some type of theme like asking guests to bring kitchen items or recipes to the shower. The event typically consists of grazing on party food and playing silly shower games, that often leave progressive or single guests feeling bored or out of place.⁵⁴ However, the main purpose of the bridal shower remains an occasion for the bride to receive gifts for her married life even though she likely has an established household of her own or with her fiancé. Another outdated element of the contemporary bridal shower involves giving the bride lingerie or other sexually-themed items for her honeymoon. This aspect of the shower originally functioned as a time for the virginal bride-to-be to display her dowry

items and garner sexual advice from her closest female confidants prior to her wedding night.⁵⁵ As with most wedding symbolism, the bridal shower signifies a throwback to conventional gender norms and represents a retrograde view of femininity; however the bridal industry portrays the shower as a quaint and enduring tradition.

In another case of capitalist opportunism, an influx of retailers has joined the traditional department stores in the nineteen billion dollar a year bridal gift industry over the last decade to capitalize on the fact that approximately 90% of brides register for gifts.⁵⁶ The registry reinforces the expectation of elaborate shower gifts and allows the bride to overindulge when creating a wish list, treating the ritual like a shopping spree. Now, instead of hoping for small household goods like mixing spoons and dish towels as in the past, brides register for larger and more expensive items such as bread-makers, cappuccino machines, and video cameras. Wedding tradition conditions the bride to expect gifts at both her shower and at her wedding. Also problematic is the way many etiquette books and retail chains label the registry as "bridal," implying a gendered division of labor within the home. Even the more egalitarian co-ed shower emphasizes gender expectations in many cases. *The Wedding Sourcebook* instructs readers to purchase "masculine" items like power tools and camping gear for co-ed showers, as they appeal to the groom.⁵⁷ Comments like these magnify stereotypical assumptions about female and male interests. As with many white wedding rituals, popular culture sentimentalizes this female festivity and all the trimmings associated with the practice, ignoring the broader gender implications of perpetuating this anachronistic ritual.

The engagement rituals of traditional white weddings frame the bride's central role in the wedding and reinforce traditional views of women. From the dramatic

proposal scene to the magical moment when a bride finds her gown and gets showered by gifts and attention at the announcement of securing male commitment, she upholds traditions that legitimize patriarchal social structures and devalue women's roles outside of the home. The mass media and wedding industry shape mainstream views concerning wedding practices and acceptable requirements for femininity, compelling American brides to participate in traditional pre-wedding rituals that preserve the public belief in the wedding day as the apex of female ambition.

¹ John Mitchell, *What the Hell is a Groom and What's He Supposed to Do?* (Kansas City: Andrews McMeel Publishing, 1999).

² Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*, 58.

³ Ellen K. Rothman, *Hands and Hearts: A History of Courtship in America* (New York: Basic Books, 1984) quoted in Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*, 6.

⁴ Geller, *Here Comes the Bride*, 75-76.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 75.

⁶ Michelle Roth, Henry Roth and Sharon Naylor, *Your Day, Your Way: The Essential Handbook for the 21st-Century Bride* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2003), 43-44; Peter N. Nelson, *Marry Like a Man: The Essential Guide for Grooms* (New York: The Penguin Group, 1992), 55.

⁷ Frugal Bride Online, "Groom's Planning Tips,"

<http://www.frugalbride.com/groomsplanningtips.html>, (accessed, December 10, 2004).

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Michael Perry, *The Groom's Survival Manual* (Pocket Books: New York, 1991), 7.

¹⁰ Nelson, *Marry Like a Man*, p.2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 37.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁴ Roth, Roth, and Naylor, *Your Day, Your Way*, 45.

¹⁵ Nelson, *Marry Like a Man*, 36.

¹⁶ Jennifer Rogers, *Tried and Trousseau: The Bride Guide* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 42-43.

¹⁷ Ingraham, *White Weddings*, 52.

¹⁸ Rogers, *Tried and Trousseau*, 44.

¹⁹ Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*, 63.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 68.

²¹ Nelson, *Marry Like a Man*, 40.

- ²² CNN Money Online, "Ka-ching! Wedding Price Tag nears \$30K," <http://money.cnn.com/2005/05/20/pf/weddings/>, (accessed, April 15, 2006) and Ingram, *White Weddings*, 51.
- ²³ Advertisement for Scott Kay Jewelry, *Modern Bride*, Dec/Jan 2005, 4.
- ²⁴ Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*, 71.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.
- ²⁶ Peggy Post, *Emily Post's Weddings* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1999), 5.
- ²⁷ Naylor, Roth, and Roth, *Your Day, Your Way*, 3.
- ²⁸ Mitchell, *What the Hell is a Groom and What's He Supposed to Do*, 30.
- ²⁹ Masni Rizal Mansor, "The Best Creative Ways to Propose," In *Ezine Articles* (22 Oct. 2005), <http://www.ezinearticles.com/?The-Best-Creative-Ways-to-Propose&id=85561>, (accessed, May 6, 2006).
- ³⁰ Geller, *Here Comes the Bride*, 90-92.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 109.
- ³² McD Wallace, *All Dressed in White*, 16-17.
- ³³ Peggy Post, *Emily Post's Weddings*, 10.
- ³⁴ Claudia Goldin and Maria Shim, "Making a Name: Women's Surnames at Marriage and Beyond," *Journal of Economic Perspectives* vol 18, 2 (Spring 2004), http://kuznets.fas.harvard.edu/~goldin/papers/Making_a_Name.pdf. (accessed, November 29, 2007), 143.
- ³⁵ "Wedding announcement in Sunday Styles," In *New York Times*, 14 May 2006, 16.
- ³⁶ Post, *Emily Post's Weddings*, 71.
- ³⁷ Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*, 78-79.
- ³⁸ Post, *Emily Post's Weddings*, 23.
- ³⁹ The Knot Online, "Engagement Parties: Etiquette 101," http://www.theknot.com/ch_article.html?Object=A01107185128&keywordID=191&keywordType=3, (accessed, May 12, 2006).
- ⁴⁰ Ingraham, *White Weddings*, 28 and Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*, 109.
- ⁴¹ CNN Money Online, <http://money.cnn.com/2005/05/20/pf/weddings/>, (accessed, May 15, 2006).
- ⁴² Ingraham, *White Weddings*, 33.
- ⁴³ Chrys Ingraham provides detailed statistics regarding women of color in *White Weddings* on pages 89-95, but I also researched several bridal magazines to get a first-hand look at the issue.
- ⁴⁴ *Signature Bride* is one of the only two magazines featuring African-American women.
- ⁴⁵ *Bridal Guide*, November/December 2004.
- ⁴⁶ Erika Engstrom "Unraveling the Knot: Hegemony, Gender, and the Weddings in Mass Media" AEJMC Conference Paper, August 2005 and Erika Engstrom, "Gender and Cultural Hegemony in Reality-Based Television Programming: The World According to The Wedding Story" AEJMC Conference Paper, 10 September 1999. In two separate examinations of wedding reality shows, Engstrom analyzed the racial composition of couples on the shows. In her first study of the reality show *A Wedding Story* in 1999, she viewed 50 episodes and 84% of the brides were Caucasian. In her second study in 2005 of the show *Real Weddings from the Knot* she sampled only 20 episodes. In this case 65% of the couples were Caucasian.

⁴⁷ Brian Halley, "Gay Marriage Wins and Civil Unions Get Runner-Up," In *The Raw Story* (24 May 2004), http://www.rawstory.com/exclusives/halley/gay_marriage_wins.html, (accessed, May 20, 2006).

⁴⁸ Engstrom, "Unraveling The Knot," 8.

⁴⁹ Rebecca Mead, "You're Getting Married: The Wal-Martization of the Bridal Business," *The New Yorker* (April 2003): 78, 85.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 83; Engstrom, "Gender and Cultural Hegemony in Reality-Based Television Programming," 4.

⁵¹ Pleck, *Celebrating the Family*, 213.

⁵² Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*, 73.

⁵³ Geller, *Here Comes the Bride*, 190.

⁵⁴ Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*, 74.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 73 and Geller, *Here Comes the Bride*, 75-176.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁵⁷ Madeline Barillo, *The Wedding Sourcebook* (Los Angeles: RGA Publishing Group, 1996), 79.

Chapter Four: Here Comes the Bride

There is no escaping the conclusion that the white wedding is wasteful, extravagant, patriarchal, heterosexist, and anachronistic.

Elizabeth Pleck, *Celebrating the Family*, 2000¹

American popular culture depicts the wedding day as the happiest occasion in a woman's life, trumping all other significant milestones and personal achievements. A bride-to-be views her wedding as the realization of a life-long dream to marry her Prince Charming and live happily-ever-after. This culturally-constructed feminine craving for romance masks a historical legacy of female subordination and obscures many patriarchal rituals which begin the moment she accepts a proposal and persists throughout the engagement, ceremony, and reception. When the modern bride embraces customs like walking down the aisle in a white gown, escorted by a male relative who gives her away, tossing her bouquet to anxious single women, and assuming a new name in marriage, she consents to romanticized symbols of male dominance.² The bridal industry's etiquette experts and mainstream America endorse white wedding rituals as social standards for twenty-first century brides without acknowledging the historical continuum that links them to a troubled past where men bartered women as commodities in a symbolic exchange of power and ownership.

Women overwhelmingly comply with the highly coveted tradition of wearing a white dress and veil, as it transforms them from ordinary women into "Princess Brides." Queen Victoria's wedding glamorized the white gown and veil more than a century and a half ago when she walked down the aisle accompanied by an eighteen-foot train.³ She was not the first bride to wear white, but she was the most influential. Her bridal attire illuminated the period's cultural interpretation of the color white; during this era, white

was a sign of wealth and privilege, Anglo-Saxon superiority, and sexual purity.⁴ Ironically, a Victorian bride celebrated her own sexual subordination by donning a white dress and veil in the elaborate white wedding spectacle, while the groom's sexual status remained immaterial.⁵ The origin of the veil dates back to the days of arranged marriages when fathers veiled their daughters in order to prevent a prospective groom from backing out of an agreement if he disliked the bride's appearance.⁶ Journalist Mara Collins notes in "Taking the Veil: A Look at Modern Marriage Traditions in American" that most brides fail to consider the symbolism of the veil, viewing it merely as an accessory of the ritual costume: "Many brides make the decision of whether or not to wear the veil based on how they are doing their hair or whether they want a tiara."⁷ Americans adopted the practice of wearing white and cemented it as a matrimonial norm. Today, wedding propagandists and some scholars claim that white wedding garments cease to represent these ideals and redefine them merely as "tradition," without regard to the implications of this subjective notion.⁸ Furthermore, the bridal gown manufacturers rarely offer alternatives to this ritually-distinctive garment and market white wedding gowns and veils as unique fashion statements, obfuscating their problematic origins with overly-romanticized rhetoric and imagery. The mass media depicts the radiant Princess Bride as the icon of feminine beauty and portrays the lavish white wedding as the ultimate female aspiration; probing into this societal phenomenon undermines the industry's profit motive and therefore seldom occurs.

While some couples inject personality and individuality into their nuptials through personalized vows or heartfelt readings, the traditional American white wedding as a cultural text fails to reflect any profound sense of social progress. The wedding day

follows a specific set of scripted and obligatory rituals designed to accentuate gender conformity and conventional views of marriage.⁹ Whether religious or secular, every ceremony features the same cast of supporting characters: the maid of honor and best man, the bridesmaids and groomsmen, the flower girl and ring bearer, and the officiant. The events of the big day unfold in a highly predictable and ritualistic manner: the bridal march down the aisle, the exchanging of vows and giving of rings, the kiss, the announcement of the newly married couple, the photographs, the toasts, the symbolic dances, the cake cutting, and the bouquet/garter toss.

The role of bridesmaid evolved over time from practical assistant to symbolic ornament in the bride's elaborate wedding fantasy.¹⁰ In the past, bridesmaids dressed in identical costumes to the bride in order to confuse evil spirits or to thwart other suitors, but modern apparel is purposely unadorned in order to avoid distraction from the bride.¹¹ Usually close female friends or family, modern bridesmaids join the bridal entourage to indulge the bride's every desire, reminiscent of royal ladies-in-waiting. In fact, American culture modeled the nuptial "Maid of Honor" after the "Maids of Honour" who served the Queens of England. Etiquette manuals advise bridesmaids to cater to the bride's every whim and never to complain or argue with her: "If a bride has her heart set on a bridesmaid dress for you, give your opinion and if she still wants it . . . buy it and wear it with a smile."¹² Accepting the role of bridesmaid carries a significant financial burden with average expenses approaching \$1,000 for the dress, alterations, shoes, undergarments, hair/make-up/nails, travel-related expenses, wedding and shower gifts, and the cost for contributing to bridal showers and bachelorette parties.¹³ The groomsmen also assume out-dated gender roles in order to satisfy the expectations of

tradition. In the days of arranged marriages and those by capture, the groom needed the services of other men to secure his bride with force if necessary.¹⁴ Their presence now complements the bridesmaids in the ceremonial procedures. According to wedding planners, typical chores required of the groomsmen include smiling for the camera and showing up for tuxedo fittings.¹⁵ These tips suggest the apathetic attitude that men take concerning participating in weddings. Furthermore, the cost associated with accepting the role of groomsmen pales in comparison to the bridesmaids' expenditures, which again reaffirms the wedding as the bride's day.

In the Post-Victorian era, upper class Christians set the standard for ceremony with the church wedding as a means to communicate the virginal status of the bride.¹⁶ Today, while some couples marry in non-religious settings, the church remains a key component of the white wedding fantasy as a symbol of tradition rather than an expression of religious beliefs. Sociologist Dawn Currie conducted a study based on interviews with 13 brides and 3 grooms to research the popularity of traditional wedding ceremonies and the role they play in reproducing patriarchal marital relations. She noted that 15 of her 16 respondents married in a church, yet only 3 held religious views.¹⁷ One bride's comment illustrates the wedding industry's ability to transmit social norms through cultural hegemony: "We did want to have a church wedding . . . Neither of us have any feelings, I guess, against the Church or for the Church. I'm not a strong frequenter, but still wanted to get married in a church."¹⁸ Whether for personal reasons or to satisfy familial or social pressures, brides who get married in the church passively participate in rituals distinctly oriented toward male dominance in exchange for the romantic ambiance of the lavish white wedding.

At the inception of the ceremony guests take their seats, ushers escort the mothers and grand-mothers to their respective places in the family rows, and the groom and groomsmen (depending on processional planning) take their positions. Usually a male in traditional ceremonies, the officiant takes his post at the front of the aisle. Some progressive churches allow female ministers to conduct wedding ceremonies, but they are a small minority.¹⁹ To signal the start of the service, standard wedding music plays as the processional of attendants take choreographed steps down the aisle. Following the bridesmaids and maid of honor, the flower girl carries a bouquet of flowers or a basket of flower petals to sprinkle on the aisle to enhance the bride's regal entrance. The flower girl joined the wedding ceremony during Medieval Times; back then, she carried a sprig of wheat as a fertility symbol. The flower girl's counterpart, the ring bearer, appeared around the same time period to provide symmetry.²⁰ Dressed similarly to the bride, a young and impressionable flower girl develops an understanding of gender roles while enacting the role of mini-bride. In combination with other cultural influences, this role entices future generations of women to yearn for their own fairytale wedding.²¹

The bride occupies center stage in the wedding production, evidenced by her elaborate once-in-a-lifetime costume and the dissimilar way she and the groom enter the ceremony; the groom enters alone prior to the ceremony without music or a processional of attendants. Just out of sight, the bride prepares for the moment she has dreamed of since playing Bridal Barbie as a child, the moment when all eyes will gaze admiringly upon her as she proceeds up the aisle. As she takes her first step, the bride leaves behind her autonomy and her name for a few moments of romantic fantasy, which popular culture has primed her to desire since childhood. A musician plays the Bridal Chorus

(Here Comes the Bride) and everyone rises to honor the bride, dressed in the most glorified feminine costume of American culture—the white wedding gown.²² While touted by wedding propagandists as a nostalgic nod to tradition, the bride's father or other male relative walks her down the aisle in a symbolic gesture of subordination.²³ Similar to the act of asking for a woman's hand in marriage, popular culture depicts this sentiment as a quaint and charming custom rather than an anachronistic ritual incongruous with contemporary society. Some exceptions to this convention include Jewish couples who both walk down the aisle with their parents and brides who either walk alone or with another relative. However, etiquette implies that alternatives to the practice of male relatives escorting the bride down the aisle usually indicates the lack of a suitable relative to uphold tradition or uncertainty on the part of the bride about which relative to select rather than a critical rejection or modification of the practice. As evidence of this deeply ingrained belief, Peggy Post suggests to a bride with more than one father-figure that her mother accompany her down the aisle as a suitable solution.²⁴

As the bride reaches the front pews, she consents to the most overtly sexist ritual of the wedding ceremony when her male escort “gives her away” to the groom, reminiscent of when men passed women like chattel from one male household to another. In many Christian ceremonies, the officiant often asks the audience “who gives this woman to this man?” or some variation of this question. Traditionally, the father answers “I do,” signaling his paternal authority or the slightly more progressive response of “her mother and I do.” However posed, the question implies the bride's financial and emotional dependence on the groom rather than a partnership between the bride and groom. In the African-American wedding planner *Jumping the Broom*, fashion editor

Harriette Cole contends that many people take offense to the idea of the father giving the bride away and prefer both parents to stand up with the bride to show their support.²⁵

Like Cole, many wedding planners offer this alternative, conceding to the patriarchal suggestion of the gesture, but they romanticize the equally problematic bride-only trip down the aisle and the passing of the bride to the groom. Blinded by the fondness for tradition, critics of feminism insist that modern brides infuse new meaning into old rituals, however, this assertion disregards the capitalist ruling interests served by the bride's jaunt down the aisle, which is the apex of the white wedding fantasy.²⁶

The remainder of the traditional wedding ceremony unfolds in a predictable pattern of ritualistic acts including the exchanging of rings, the vows, the declaration of the new couple, and the kiss. Many aspects of the ceremony reflect conflicting tendencies; some acts exhibit egalitarian innovation, but subtle layers of patriarchal or capitalistic influence remain embedded in many of these traditions. The exchanging of rings rectifies the asymmetrical symbolism of the betrothal ring, which bound the woman to a marriage contract, but romantic imagery conceals the commercial motives behind promoting a groom ring, which emerged in the postwar consumer culture of the 1950s.²⁷ Current trends suggest that over 90% of grooms receive a wedding band, putting the average combined total for both wedding rings around \$1,300.00.²⁸ Following the wedding, however, women tend to exhibit more of an emotional attachment to their rings than men, clutching to their marital status as a major source of identity. An internet blog article, "Should A Man Wear a Wedding Ring?," exemplifies this cultural perceptive: "Despite the fact that the wearing of a ring by a woman is a matter of choice, it is in fact almost obligatory due to the fact that it is so common. Many women do not even

consider the possibility of not wearing one. Often, however, a man usually considers the wearing of a wedding ring very carefully.”²⁹

The wedding vows offer couples the opportunity to express their individuality and commitment to each other in a meaningful and personalized way, yet, traditional vows fail to reflect a profound sense of modernity. Most couples duplicate standard wedding vows, reciting predictable language such as “to have and to hold” and “for as long as we both shall live,” repeating the words in a rehearsed and perfunctory manner rather than declaring their feelings and intentions in a relaxed and natural way, free from the burden of tradition and social expectations.³⁰ In response to societal dissent, the bulk of ceremonies omit the vow to obey, but various Christian denominations still support patriarchal social arrangements and require the bride to repeat promises of obedience and submission to her husband in standard vows:

Bride:

I love you and I know you love me. I am confident that God has chosen you to be my husband. It is my prayer and desire that you will find in me the helpmate God designed especially for you and in confidence I will submit myself unto your headship as unto our Lord. Therefore, I pledge to you my life as an obedient, faithful and loving wife.³¹

Whether viewed as simply anachronistic or overtly patriarchal, traditional wedding vows signify a throwback to a time before the two-income household and a mounting divorce rate.

The ceremonial rituals conclude with the officiant’s pronouncement of the couple as “husband and wife” or the less endearing “man and wife.”³² While not the preferred form of closure in the wedding, mass media outlets often use these expressions interchangeably. Rebecca Mead, a journalist for *The New Yorker*, opted to use the phrase “man and wife” in a contemporary article about the commercialization of the wedding industry: “The average American bride and groom together spend twenty-two thousand

dollars on the day that sees them transformed into man and wife.”³³ The failure of a liberal newspaper journalist to recognize the negative connotations of the saying demonstrates the subtle and subconscious way the wedding industry influences mainstream social ideals and propagates assumptions about gender. An article in the *Brandeis Hoot* conveys the consequences of dismissing the social significance of the expression: “And so the phrase ‘I pronounce you man and wife’ does not directly alter our laws. It does not make men beat their wives. It doesn’t ensure discrimination against them. But it does alter our values. It hides away in the back of our heads subtly suggesting that men are more important than women—it’s insidious; it’s unconscious. It’s hard to fight because it is so subtle—perfectly rational and intelligent people from all sides of the political spectrum can easily dismiss its effects.”³⁴ In another gesture of sexist sentimentality, the officiant faces the groom and announces, “You may now kiss the bride,” evoking a historical legacy of male sexual ownership in marriage. Similar to the male-initiated proposal, popular culture socializes women to enact the role of passive recipient, portraying the male-initiated kiss as the romantic climax of the wedding ceremony. Although couples attach a great deal of emotion to this moment, the ritual in its current form depicts female submission as a natural state.

Chronologically, the next phase of the wedding day entails the ritual recording of the event through photography. A male-dominated profession, wedding photography comprises another key segment of the multi-billion dollar wedding industry, generating significant profits from marketing patriarchal and capitalist ideologies as tradition. The images preserved by wedding albums convey assumptions about gender and power relations and the cultural belief that the wedding day revolves around the bride.

Photographers often shoot bridal portraits weeks before the wedding to preserve the pristine image of the bride; the traditional image accentuating the white dress, veil, and the bouquet, which historically symbolized virginity and fertility.³⁵ In her article, "Ritualized Transmission of Social Norms," Michele Strano asserts that photographic images of the bride communicate messages about gender expectations: "The conventions of wedding photography in part serve to ensure the display of socially acceptable images of male and female identity."³⁶ Customarily, the bride poses in the traditional "S curve," tilting her head toward her shoulder with chin up, revealing her neck, a position suggesting vulnerability.³⁷ Prior to the ceremony, brides also pose for pictures to document their magical transformation from an everyday woman into a princess bride. A signature bridal photograph features the white wedding dress hanging alone, emphasizing the societal reverence bestowed upon the bride's ritual costume—the groom's rented tuxedo never warrants this special attention.

Wedding photographers pose the bride and groom, the wedding party, and the family members in various combinations, but the pictures always frame the bride, her dress, and the veil; photographers or their assistants place the bride's train and veil as the centerpieces for almost every arrangement. The positioning techniques used by photographers reflect the unbalance of power between men and women secured by the wedding industry through hegemony. Contrary to the "S curve" used to situate brides, the groom ordinarily stands in a "C curve," where his head and shoulders form a ninety degree angle implying his strength.³⁸ Interesting to note, photographers learn to master these techniques early in their professional training.³⁹ They position the bride and groom in distinctly stereotypical ways, exaggerating dominant cultural views of masculinity and

femininity. In photographs of the groom alone, he appears relaxed and looks straight at the camera while the photographer consistently captures the bride looking demurely away from the camera through a soft-focus filter to project innocence and delicacy.⁴⁰ Several other wedding photography techniques steeped in patriarchal tradition include placing women and children lower in the picture than men, positioning the groom's hands over the bride's, indicative of his dominance, and posing the groom with one arm around the bride.⁴¹

As the ceremony moves to the reception, another series of dubious celebratory traditions ensue. From the introduction of the newly married couple with the groom's name to the throwing of the bouquet, couples consciously participate in celebratory customs which reinforce the dominant values of patriarchy and capitalism. The wedding industry capitalizes on the socially-cultivated yearning for romance and aesthetic perfection, linking happiness to consumption of their very costly products and services. Brides willingly incur between eight to ten thousand dollars in reception costs in pursuit of the emotional fulfillment promised in the pages of bridal magazines and in the plots of cinematic romances.⁴² Similar to the ceremony, the reception follows a series of scripted rituals promoted by popular culture as wedding day essentials. The white wedding fantasy obscures the societal consequences of adherence to these practices, which clearly slant in the direction of male dominance and traditional gender roles.

In the first symbolic act of the event, a DJ or master of ceremonies announces the arrival of the newly married couple. Guests overwhelmingly respond with joyous enthusiasm at the presentation of the bride and groom for the first time with the groom's name. While undoubtedly an exuberant moment for the couple, the practice also alludes

to the elevated status of the bride as a Mrs. and celebrates the merger of the bride's identity into her husband's. The instant gratification that women receive for adhering to this socializing norm explains why 90% of women assume their husband's name and relinquish their maiden names.⁴³ The act of yielding to this name-changing practice demonstrates the way popular culture romanticizes tradition. In her article "The Maiden Name Debate," journalist Katie Rophie admits that: "there is something romantic and pleasantly old-fashioned about giving up your name....and seeing yourself represented as Mrs. John Doe."⁴⁴ Next, the bride, groom, and the wedding party take their seats at the head table in a way suggesting their stately importance. The DJ moves the bride and groom through each step of the reception from the dances, the toasts and the cake-cutting to the tossing of the bouquet and the garter. The bride and groom partake in a symbolic "first dance" to the music of trendy wedding songs like Shania Twain's *From This Moment*. First-dance songs stir up feelings of romance and emotion in newlyweds and wedding spectators, but they also function as propagandist tools of the wedding industry; the lyrics gloss over the real work of relationships and eclipse the reality of increasing divorce rates. The next dance is the father-daughter dance, and like the paternal escort down the aisle, this dance sentimentalizes the passage of the bride from the responsibility of her father to her husband. No act of the traditional ceremony or reception pays tribute to the respective mothers, the groom's father, or the couple's close friends or other significant relatives.

For the most part, male members of the family and wedding party take positions of authority as the toasters, reinforcing the belief that public speaking is a male province. Wedding planners dictate the best man as toast master, followed by the groom, the father

of the bride, and the father of the groom.⁴⁵ While some etiquette guides include a maid of honor toast, they label the gesture un-traditional and confirm deeply-ingrained gender stereotypes about the relationship between women and weddings with their suggestions. Wedding experts advise the maid of honor-not the best man or other male toasters-to bring a tissue to properly prepare for the inevitable emotional overload the toast will provoke. Following the best man, the groom typically lavishes the bride with romantic remarks and injects humor into an awkward public acknowledgement of a private feeling. The bride again enacts a role of passivity during the toasts; she graciously accepts the groom's romantic adulation, but usually makes no toast of her own, which subtly hints at the cultural belief in traditional gender roles.

In the next staged performance of the wedding reception, the bride and groom cut the cake. Several different interpretations exist regarding the positioning of the hands and the symbolism of the cake itself. Some etiquette manuals explain that the groom positions his hand over the bride's hand as an indication of his authority and some claim that the groom places his hand under the bride's for support; however, both naturalize the male provider narrative.⁴⁶ Irrespective of the placing of the hands, the cake plays a key role in the wedding reception. The elaborate wedding cake represents another matrimonial detail marked by the notion of conspicuous consumption encouraged by the wedding industry. The modern wedding cake evolved out of multiple traditions dating back to the Roman Empire when the groom broke barley bread over the head of the bride to symbolize his control over her virginity.⁴⁷ The white icing on today's wedding cakes arose as one of the components of the "white wedding," modeled after Queen Victoria's nuptials. Her cake purportedly weighed over 300 pounds and featured the first

documented case of a wedding cake with multiple tiers of sugary confection. In Victorian times, the white icing signified purity, wealth, and privilege due to the limited availability of the ingredients.⁴⁸ Once referred to as the bride's cake, the white wedding cake creates a visual link to the bride, enhancing her costume and reaffirming her central role in the wedding. According to the Bridal Association of America, a mid-range, three-tiered cake costs upwards of five hundred dollars.⁴⁹ The bridal industry portrays the wedding cake as an essential detail of the white wedding fantasy, unquestionably worthy of such high expenditures to ensure romantic perfection.

The bouquet and garter toss are the last staged acts of the wedding ceremony. Most brides participate in these party-pleasing antics despite the retrograde and insulting overtones they imply. The bouquet toss conveys the societal significance ascribed to women to secure male commitment and get married. When the bride throws her bouquet, she symbolically passes on her success in the marriage market to the woman who beats out other anxious singles to catch it. The scramble to win the toss demonstrates the heightened anxiety internalized by women to find Mr. Right and fulfill their own dreams of an elaborate white wedding. Following the bouquet toss, the groom then removes the garter from the bride's leg and throws it to a group of men, in effect providing symbolic closure to the day's events. While viewed as a playful and amusing pastime, the matching of the two victors communicates a subtle message of assimilation and conformity to the institutions that drive the traditional white wedding as well as sexual objectification of women.

No occasion in a woman's life merits the same social recognition as dressing up like a fairytale princess, walking down the aisle, and saying "I do." The popularity for

the traditional white wedding remains strong despite the conflicting tendencies of individuality and gender conformity present throughout the ceremony and the reception. The immediate praise and attention lavished upon women for propagating tradition fuels the propaganda surrounding this rite-of-passage and leaves little room to question the automatic adherence to this sacred event. When a modern bride enacts outdated gender roles in the pursuit of the perfect fairytale wedding, she disregards the social implications of endorsing rituals that bolster capitalist patriarchal social arrangements and foster an unequal balance of wealth and power.

¹ Pleck, *Celebrating the Family*, 231.

² Geller, *Here Comes the Bride*, 117.

³ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁴ Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*, 31.

⁵ Pleck, *Celebrating the Family*, 215.

⁶ All Occasion Music Online, "Wedding Traditions and Customs History," <http://www.aomdj.com/traditio.htm>, (accessed, March 18, 2004).

⁷ Mara Collins, "Taking the Veil: A Look at Modern Marriage Traditions in America," *Girlistic Magazine*, (Summer, 2007): 4.

⁸ Otnes and Pleck make this claim on 7 and 82 of *Cinderella Dreams*.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁰ Collins, "Taking the Veil," 9.

¹¹ Geller, *Here Comes the Bride*, 214.

¹² Frugal Bride Online, "Advice to Maid of Honour or Bridesmaids," <http://www.frugalbride.com/advicetomoh.html>, (accessed, July 21, 2007).

¹³ MSN Money Online, "The Bridesmaid's Survival Guide," <http://articles.moneycentral.msn.com/CollegeAndFamily/LoveAndMoney/TheBridesmaidsSurvivalGuide.aspx>, (accessed, July 21, 2007). The excessive cost to participate as a bridesmaid is fairly common knowledge (for women), but this article breaks down the average cost for the items.

¹⁴ All Occasion Music Online, <http://www.aomdj.com/traditio.htm>, (accessed, March 18, 2004).

¹⁵ Frugal Bride Online, "Groomsmen's Duties," <http://www.frugalbride.com/groomsmenduties.html>, (accessed, July 21, 2007).

¹⁶ Pleck, *Celebrating the Family*, 210.

¹⁷ Dawn H. Currie, "Here Comes the Bride: The Making of a 'Modern Traditional' Wedding in Western Culture," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 24 (Autumn 1993): 3-4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁹ Many Christian denominations such as the Roman Catholic Church strictly prohibit women from achieving Priesthood, reflecting their dogmatic belief in women's innate inferiority. While some churches allow women to take positions of authority, it is not the norm. Just choosing to have a wedding in a church that does not allow women to assume these roles reflects the belief in male superiority.

²⁰ Ackerman, *A Natural History of Love*, 298.

²¹ Geller, *Here Comes the Bride*, 232.

²² *Ibid.*, 260.

²³ Engstrom, "Gender and Cultural Hegemony in Reality-Based Television Programming," 8. She performed an analysis of the customary rituals performed at weddings based on 50 episodes of the reality show *A Wedding Story*. According to her statistics, someone escorted the bride down the aisle 94% of the time (68% of brides were escorted by their father or stepfather, 14% were escorted by both parents, 8% were escorted by another family member such as their brother or uncle and a few walked alone). These statistics suggest that the tradition is firmly anchored in mainstream American culture.

²⁴ Always a Bridesmaid Online, "Down the Aisle without Dad," Wedding Etiquette blog, 22 May 2007, <http://alwaysbridesmaid.typepad.com/weddingfaq/2007/05/index.html>, (accessed, September 4, 2007).

²⁵ Harriette Cole, *Jumping the Broom: The African-American Wedding Planner* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, Inc., 1993), 118.

²⁶ Hugo Schwyzer Online Blog Site, "Engagement Ring Reflections," <http://hugoschwzyer.net/2004/12/07/engagement-ring-reflections/>. These types of comments can be found in various places such as wedding websites and blog sites. The author of this blog entry believes that brides can redefine old traditions and not feel oppressed, but my perspective advances that while an individual bride may not feel oppressed by participating in patriarchal traditions, there are broader social implications with respect to gender than just how she feels about her individual actions. (accessed, October 4, 2007).

²⁷ Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*, 113.

²⁸ Chicago Wedding Services Online, "Average Wedding Costs in the United States," http://chicagoweddingservices.com/planning/average_wedding_costs_US.htm, (accessed, October 4, 2007) and Ingraham, *White Weddings*, 53.

²⁹ Attachment Parenting Online Blog, "Should a Man Wear a Wedding Ring?" http://www.apparenting.com/should_a_man_wear_a_wedding_ring.html, (accessed, October 4, 2007).

³⁰ Engstrom, "Gender and Cultural Hegemony in Reality-Based Television Programming," 8. Only 8% of the couples used non-traditional or personalized vows.

³¹ "My Wedding Vows," <http://www.myweddingvows.com/traditional-wedding-vows/christian-wedding-vows>, (accessed, October 5, 2007). Under Traditional Christian ceremonies, almost every example included the word, obey, obedient, submit, or submissive in the wording of the bride's vows.

³² While not as common as "husband and wife", the phrase "man and wife" is still used relatively frequently. I have personally attended several weddings when this closure was used. It is, however, hard to find specific evidence supporting this particular belief.

³³ Mead, "You're Getting Married," 76.

- ³⁴ Sean Patrick-Hogan, "I Pronounce You Man and Wife," *The Brandeis Hoot* [online newspaper]. 2 Dec. 2005 (accessed, October 9, 2007).
http://www.thehoot.net/?module=displaystory&story_id=1130&edition_id=25&format=html (1 page).
- ³⁵ Michelle M. Strano, "Ritualized Transmission of Social Norms Through Wedding Photography," *Communications Theory* 16 (2006): 31-46, 38.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 38.
- ³⁷ Charles Lewis, "Hegemony in the Ideal: Wedding Photography, Consumerism, and Patriarchy," *Women's Studies in Communication* 20 (Fall 1997): 167-87, (printed page 7).
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 9-10.
- ⁴² Best Wedding Sites Online, "Fun Facts and Figures to Help You Plan an Affordable and Elegant Wedding Reception," (information provided by www.appetizerstogo.com),
http://www.bestweddingsites.com/Articles/Article_June04_Facts.html, (accessed, October 25, 2007).
- ⁴³ Katie Rophie, "The Maiden Name Debate: What's Changed Since the 1970s?" In *Slate* [online magazine]. 16 March 2004 (accessed, October 25, 2007),
<http://www.slate.com/id/2097231/>.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁵ Peter Halpin, "2007 Wedding Toast Speeches," *EzineArticles* [online journal]. 27 Feb. 2007 (accessed, October 25, 2007), <http://ezinearticles.com/?Wedding-Toast-Speeches&id=470609>.
- ⁴⁶ Geller, *Here Comes the Bride*, 329 and Otnes and Pleck, *Cinderella Dreams*, 125.
- ⁴⁷ Hudson Valley's Wedding Website, "The Wedding Cake...History, Customs, and Tradition," <http://www.hudsonvalleyweddings.com/guide/cakehistory.htm>, (accessed, November 3, 2007).
- ⁴⁸ "A Brief Herstory of The Wedding Cake," *Girlistic Magazine*, (Summer 2007): 4.
- ⁴⁹ Bridal Association of America Online, "Wedding Statistics, Market Research, Trends and News for the Wedding Professional,"
http://www.bridalassociationofamerica.com/Wedding_Statistics/, (accessed, November 3, 2007).

Conclusion

The weddings we hold today are not dramatic productions with the bride in the starring role. They are real life, significant large-scale public events that should reflect our values. And if we've rejected those old gender roles, we ought to reject their most celebrated moment.

Sarah Blustain, *Lilith Magazine*, Spring 2000¹

Despite the social changes prompted by the feminist movement, American society still touts the wedding day as the ultimate goal for women, seemingly blinded to equal rights initiatives and the less-restrictive twenty first century marriage. Steeped in the residue of wedlock's oppressive history, the traditional white wedding naturalizes an outdated model of gender relations under the guise of romantic love and functions as a vehicle to reinforce a patriarchal view of the world. Images of the radiant bride dominate popular culture, suggesting a utopian view of marriage and diverting attention away from the reality that gender inequality is alive and well. The emotional fulfillment promised by wedding propagandists compels women to subscribe to the contemporary wedding narrative which triggers them to flaunt their engagement rings as symbols of validation, glide down the aisle in an unoriginal, century-old costume, and trade their individual identity for the elevated social status of wife. Brides operating from a post-feminist belief in the power of choice fail to consider the powerful ruling interests shaping their decisions. As Jaclyn Geller notes in her book, *Here Comes the Bride: Women, Weddings, and the Marriage Mystique*, "choice is rarely neutral, unbiased, or individualistic."²

Critiquing this issue with a materialist feminist approach involves looking at all of the interconnected forces that drive the wedding industry and exposing their combined role in propagating the ideologies of capitalism and patriarchy. In a complex and insidious way, popular cultures entices women into idealizing traditions that generate

significant profits in the primary and secondary wedding markets and mask a history of female subordination and compulsory gender conformity. Contrary to popular belief, weddings do not exist in a vacuum; they reflect and reproduce dominant class values through cultural hegemony. While one bride may walk down the aisle in white, exercising her agency and claiming to appropriate tradition, she disregards or fails to consider the broader cultural implications of partaking in rituals that feed into a larger cultural system that supports race, class, and gender hierarchies and keeps wealth in the hands of a few.

Celebrating unions free from the bonds of matrimony's tainted past involves discarding customs that reflect male dominance and female passivity in favor of ones that honor the couple and their shared values. Society needs to take a more balanced approach to weddings and promote this special occasion as a celebration of two unique individuals rather than a bride-centered experience. As long as American culture portrays the wedding day as the ultimate female goal and repackages traditional gender roles and gestures of subordination as romantic fantasy, the desire and the demand for the traditional white wedding will never wane. Given the degree to which women internalize the beliefs that secure consent to this ritual, recreating a new paradigm is not an easy task. However, blindly adhering to tradition without recognizing the way it subtly suggests women's secondary status in society is equally problematic. Deconstructing the wedding fairytale begins with an awareness of the origins of wedding tradition, recognizing the cultural forces securing compliance with dominant class ideologies, and abandoning the rituals deeply rooted in race, class, and gender inequality.

¹ Sarah Blustain, "Counterproposal: Faced with a Marriage Proposal, One Woman Decides to Take Matters Into her Own Hands (and Heart)," *Lilith Magazine* (Spring 2000): 4.

² Geller, *Here Comes the Bride*, 71.

Epilogue

“Lifting the Veil on Traditional White Weddings” is the result of several years of research and labor. When I started this project I had a simple plan to write a thesis on patriarchal wedding day rituals, but along the way I expanded my focus, got married, and had a baby, which all significantly influenced my perspective on this endeavor. As I began researching, I realized the complexities of the wedding industry; I did not feel that I could do justice to the topic without explaining the various factors that influence modern day weddings. When I started, there were only a few references critical of the subject. The problematic aspects of white wedding rituals seemed so obvious to me, but little research existed on the issue. Getting married is such a coveted social convention that few feminist scholars delve into the subject or question the validity of wedding tradition.

Not surprisingly, I met with a lot of resistance from family, friends, and the general public while researching and writing about this topic. Most people failed to recognize why I would want to critique such a sacred and time-honored tradition, some dismissed the connection between the sexist gestures of weddings and everyday life and a few got outright angry at me for questioning weddings at all. On several occasions, I witnessed how deeply engrained wedding norms are on the psyche of most people. I have known for as long as I can remember that I would never change my name if I were to join my life with a partner in marriage; it was not an issue that I ever questioned; however, my decision was not well-understood by others. When I informed some of my closest friends about my plans to get married, almost all of them asked me, without fail, whether I had been asked yet. Each time, I had to swallow my pride and pick my jaw up

off the floor. Not only did these friends know about my feelings concerning these practices, but they knew about my thesis and neither deterred them from inquiring or expecting me to elaborate on some dramatic proposal scene. Similarly, when I discussed my intentions of keeping my name to a member of my husband's family, she asked me very seriously, "how does that work?" as if she could not imagine a world where a woman might value her own identity.

On another occasion, I met with some bizarre looks by the wedding coordinator from the *Starlight Majesty* (a cruise ship), where I got married in the most untraditional manner. I must first add that I had to pay more per head for my guests because it was a "wedding" even though I chose to forego all of their wedding protocol. As she read from the wedding itinerary list, the event planner stopped after every item looking for me to elaborate on my desires and expectations. Since I was not looking to participate in any traditional wedding rituals, I answered no to almost every question. She looked at me quite confused and did not understand why a "bride" would ignore all of these wedding necessities. She confessed that she had never consulted with a couple who eliminated all of the wedding rituals. These experiences just sharpened my focus and I became more determined than ever to expose the reason why weddings maintain such a hegemonic stronghold on the collective American conscious.

This has not been an easy project. I felt an affinity for the comments made by Chrys Ingraham in her epilogue to *White Weddings: Romancing Heterosexuality in Popular Culture*. She explains that while we may be critical of popular culture, we are all still products of our environment. I cried at weddings while simultaneously observing behaviors and patterns that supported my research on this topic. In the past, I deviated

from my personal values and beliefs and participated as a bridesmaid. It was an internal struggle whether to support or disappoint my friends. I chose to support my friends despite disagreeing with their desire to uphold traditions that I found deeply disturbing.

My goal was to critique traditional weddings, but my thesis turned into a study of the ways history, popular culture, and capitalism all work to secure consent to traditional white weddings. It was not my intent to attack marriage, which also needs further critical examination, but to explain why popularity for the white wedding increases despite gains made for social equality. I feel that my thesis has contributed to the scholarly research on the subject in a thought-provoking way, and I hope that my efforts help readers to open their minds, to question their automatic adherence to wedding tradition, and to start generating new ways to celebrate their unions free from patriarchal gestures, unrealistic fantasy, and gender conformity.

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