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11

Abstinence and ambivalence

The prescription of twin beds as an aid to self-restraint in the marital advice literature of the late nineteenth century establishes this as an ideal in a discourse concerned to equalize the balance of power and pleasure available to husbands and wives. To what extent, however, did such dictates reach into the wider culture, and for how long? The cultivation of regimes of continence might, after all, have existed as a matter of *recherché* and minority interest, advocated by the few at the fringe, but impinging little on the ways in which marriage was lived and understood more generally.

A letter received by Marie Stopes in September 1918 suggests that marital reformers' recommendation of twin beds as an aid to moderation did indeed make its mark on the conduct of at least some marriages of the time. Following the publication of *Married Love* in 1918, many readers wrote to Stopes seeking advice regarding their marital problems. Mrs J. from Waterford in Ireland was one such correspondent. Mrs J. and her husband had adhered to the regimen prescribed by many of the advisers discussed in the previous chapter, strategically adopting twin beds as an aid to sexual moderation. However, the plan backfired:

Before I married I stipulated that we should have separate beds in the hope that this would help us to practice self-restraint; but we found this most unsuccessful. It was cold and lonely, and the separation was sure to cause undesired excitement whenever we did happen to lie for a short time together in one bed. After nearly two years we abandoned this plan and have for the last 9 or 10 months been sleeping always together. As a result we are both much better in health and content with much less frequent unions than we were when sleeping apart.¹

Far from aiding self-restraint, twin beds had stimulated 'undesired excitement', and the couple had had to resort to a double bed in order to achieve the

improved health and contentment associated with less frequent sexual contact. Nonetheless, despite – or perhaps because of – these unintended consequences, the anecdote is instructive. It suggests that sexual restraint in marriage was an aspiration, embraced as a means to attain a sense of general well-being; that twin beds were seen as a technology likely to aid its achievement, but that such technologies sometimes malfunctioned, and so could not always be trusted to deliver on their promise.

While the experience of Mrs J. suggests that marital continence was an ideal consciously adopted by some, it is, on its own, no more than an indicative anecdote concerning the early twentieth-century ethos of sex in marriage. However, the work of recent historians, in particular Simon Szreter (1996), suggests that the key co-ordinates in her account – marriage, sex and continence – were widely understood to exist in a strong and active relationship to each other. Far from abstinence inhabiting the cultural margins, Szreter suggests it to be a defining and longstanding phenomenon. This chapter begins by exploring his proposition of a widespread ‘culture of abstinence’, considering the ways this manifested in twentieth-century marriages, and then asks how the material organization of conjugal sleeping might have figured in this dynamic. To what extent were twin beds understood as players within discourses of marital sexual continence?

Analysing the marked reduction in the British birth rate after 1870, Szreter posits the prevalence of a wide-ranging and longstanding culture of abstinence. Historians and demographers had long accepted that the decline in the birth rate was the result of widespread, conscious and willed changes in sexual behaviours and practices, but Szreter concluded, contrary to others’ arguments, that this was not the result of greater recourse to barrier methods of contraception. To these he found a good degree of hostility, whether from feminists, who thought these gave further licence to husbands to demand sex without consideration of their wives’ wishes, or from some doctors, who thought them injurious to the health (Bland [1995] 2001: 189–221, Mason 1994: 52–64, 1995: 211–12). The decline in the birth rate was instead, Szreter argues, the consequence of married couples limiting their sexual activity, motivated by a conscious wish to control the frequency of childbirth and thereby to lower the costs (financial, physical and emotional) of childrearing.

Couples sought to limit the number of children they had by a variety of means, Szreter suggests, all of which involved voluntary sexual restraint. These included delayed marriage and *coitus interruptus* but also sexual continence, all located on a continuum of restraint, with abstinence at one end of the spectrum and the moderation of sexual contact at the other. While he rejects the idea that the conscious embrace of continence evinces a widespread ideological turn against sex, he nonetheless suggests that this normalization of an ambition of sexual continence was underpinned by an enduring cultural

validation of abstinence (1996: 361–96). A centuries-long British tradition of late marriage had meant that ‘for generations sexual self-denial had been the institutionalised norm for young unmarried adults in Britain’s culture’. Consequently, the population ‘had been thoroughly schooled over centuries in the attitudes and expectations required for acceptance of this form of self-restraint’ (ibid.: 393).

What was new in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, however, was ‘the increasing extension of the long-established, indigenous practice of sexual abstinence among young adults into married life’ (ibid.: 398), so that rather than pre-marital sexual abstinence ceasing with marriage, it seems rather to have come to serve as a training ground for sex in married life. In his analysis, marriage did not serve as a place of untrammelled and unlimited sexual encounter. Its sexual ethos did not serve as a contrast – even if only for the husband – to a cultural field of sexual constraint and prohibition which warned of the dangers of masturbation, nocturnal emissions, spermatorrhoea, leucorrhoea, prostitution, venereal disease and impotence, as well as of alcohol, tobacco, a rich diet and salacious reading. Instead, the dominant culture of marriage now embedded these constraints within the conjugal sexual dynamic (ibid.: 398–9). And this importation of the practice of abstinence into marriage itself broadly coincided with the adoption of twin beds by married couples.

Szreter’s study provides an empirical counterpoint to the idealist discourses of sex in marriage discussed in the previous chapter, suggesting that however much social purity writings might seem to be utopian fantasies of marital equality, they were written and read in a context highly attuned and receptive to discourses of self-scrutiny and restraint. But just as significant as the statistical dimension of his study, which establishes the extensive reach of abstinence, is his attempt to extrapolate from a range of qualitative sources just what the affective climate of such a culture might have been. Like other historians of sexuality, he points to the importance of the social and political circumstances that precipitated the social purity and social hygiene campaigns with their intense scrutiny of sexuality and morality. Public and political interest in these issues in Britain can be gauged, for instance, by the response to the passing of the Contagious Diseases Acts of 1864, 1866 and 1869 (Bland [1995] 2001: xiii–xiv, 32–7; Weeks 1989: 85–92). Ostensibly aimed at addressing the spread of sexually transmitted diseases associated with prostitution in barrack towns and ports, these Acts resulted in the implicit legalization of prostitution, the tacit acceptance of men’s recourse to prostitutes and an increasingly draconian policing of prostitutes themselves. Subsequently, diverse political constituencies found common cause against the Acts. Evangelical conservatives were outraged by the insult to marriage inherent in such a position, for example, while feminists deplored the

institutionalization of the double standard regarding the men and women involved in prostitution. A period of intense public debate and activism ensued (Szreter 1996: 415). The Acts were finally repealed in 1886, a year after two landmark interventions. The first of these was the passing of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, raising the age of sexual consent for girls from thirteen to sixteen and criminalizing all homosexual activity; the second was the publication of a series of articles concerning child prostitution in London in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, causing a public furore and feeding into the already vocal social purity campaigns (Bland [1995] 2001: xiv–xvii, 7–9, 58–60). In short, late in the century there was a period of intense public discussion about the unacceptable face of sexuality, accompanied by ‘an increasingly strict formal regulation of various dimensions of sexuality ... into a heterosexual, monogamous straitjacket’ (Szreter 1996: 415). If sex was rarely off the public agenda, it was present in forms categorically marked out as morally and socially reprehensible and requiring prohibition and reformation.

The familial corollary of such a highly sexualized but prohibitive public culture, Szreter suggests, is that people might ‘have come to entertain quite strongly negative or at least guilty and ambivalent feelings towards sex’ (ibid.: 416). Such an attitude would have been ‘conducive to a régime of low coital frequency voluntarily adopted by both partners and therefore seen by them as merely normal and “civilised” behaviour’. In turn, such beliefs would ‘provide the rationale for investing abstinence itself and the practice of conscious self-restraint with a positive evaluation’ (ibid.: 416–17). He suggests, that is, a correspondence between the discussion of public sexual morality and the negotiation of private sexual mores in marriage, and posits the permeability of the latter to the former. Marital abstinence could be seen, in some measure, not only as a pragmatic bid for family limitation, therefore, but also as a rebuff to the sexual iniquities of the public sphere. This could be found either in the repudiation of all sexuality as a bestial and lowering force and thus to be eschewed, or else it could be recast, refined and elevated through certain consciously adopted disciplinary means to the status of a morally or spiritually enhancing practice (ibid.: 456; Mason 1994: 221–6).

How might such a marital and familial culture of abstinence have been inhabited? How might it have shaped the ethos of the relationship of those seeking to live by its codes, or at least to accommodate themselves to its demands? Szreter provides some intriguing, if preliminary, answers to these questions. From the 1860s to the 1930s – that is, right through to the Second World War, by which time barrier contraceptives were more widely available and socially acceptable – is likely, he suggests, to have been a period ‘of *increased* public inhibitions and private difficulties in sexual relations between husbands and wives, men and women’ (ibid.: 560; my emphasis). This is an arresting proposition. Its conclusion that married people of the mid-nineteenth

century were *less* sexually inhibited and experienced fewer sexual difficulties than their putatively better-informed and better-equipped counterparts in the first third of the twentieth century contradicts any comfortable assumption of a twentieth-century sexual progress narrative. The birth-control methods identified in his study, and indeed in many others, as the most commonly used between the 1860s and the 1930s – abstinence, continence and *coitus interruptus* – produced marriages in which spouses made ‘artificial, stressful attempt[s] to keep a physical, emotional distance from each other’, characterized by ‘ritualised and formulaic patterns of sexual interaction, in order to deal with the problem ... of chronic uncertainty over their own and over each other’s genuine sexual wishes and motives’ (ibid.: 566, 422). Overall, Szreter identifies this as a time not of gradual sexual emancipation but of ‘an increasing intensity of cultural negotiation and private bargaining between husbands and wives over the terms and conditions on which sexuality was enjoyed *in marriage*’ (ibid.: 578; my emphasis). Consequently, married life was characterized by inhibition, stress, distance, uncertainty and bartering. In short, he concludes, ‘Sexual “bad faith” (in Sartre’s existentialist sense) is endemic in such a culture’ (ibid.: 422): that is, its practices are the result of a self-deception whose aim is to deny that matters could be other than as they are. Abstinence, in other words, was recuperated as both inevitable and desirable.

While Szreter’s is the most exhaustive investigation and characterization of a habitually abstinent culture, his hypothesis finds echoes elsewhere. When, for example, Marie Stopes addresses the bitter disappointment experienced by people who marry expecting joy only to find frustration, confusion and unhappiness, her intervention is at the level of the sexual relationship and of issues of trust and communication between spouses. It is hard not to read this as a refusal of the bad faith proposed by Szreter, and, indeed, the deluge of letters received by Stopes following the publication of *Married Love* offers testament enough to this: one woman even referred in passing to a man who ‘got bitten with the celibacy craze’ (Hall [1978] 1981: 103). Many of the letters from middle-class correspondents, in particular, speak of both sexual ignorance and sexual anxiety occasioned by abstinence and *coitus interruptus*. Engagement was a period of especially acute confusion. One woman, engaged to marry a missionary, reports that until reading *Married Love* she and her fiancé ‘had both looked upon the sex-life as something rather degrading and a kind of necessary evil’ (ibid.: 69). A young man, anxious about feeling ‘sexual longing when sitting on the couch with my fiancée’, asks whether such feelings are ‘normal and natural’; he concludes, ‘I suppose I should try and smother my sexual feeling?’ (ibid.: 170). Another, also engaged, is concerned about the consequences of self-restraint as a method of birth control: ‘I can’t understand how people can be married for a

year or two and have no children without injuring their health' (ibid.: 164). A husband of twelve years confessed, 'Until about a year ago we never knew a woman was capable of a full orgasm' (ibid.: 147). Fear of pregnancy was a widespread inhibitor: a man wrote that his wife was so anxious about becoming pregnant that 'the sex relations are rather abnormal between us and I have had unwillingly to practise "coitus interruptus"' (ibid.: 148), and a 37-year-old woman from London who had had '14 children nine living' wrote asking for contraceptive information: 'I realy must try something as my Husband is not a careful man in that respect I dont want any more if I should sink with having another what would become of all the other little ones my nervs are getting quite bad worrying from one month to another' (ibid.: 16; original spelling). While fear of pregnancy is mostly expressed by Stopes's female correspondents, anxiety and ignorance – articulated in terms sometimes puzzled, at other times shamefaced or desperate – are just as commonly expressed by men as by women, by members of the armed forces as by clergymen, by the upper and middle classes as by the working class.² It seems as if the culture of sexual abstinence, with all its attendant stresses, was truly a national one.

Stopes's correspondents were self-selecting for their sexual and reproductive anxiety or ignorance, so it is not surprising to find these traits in their letters. Confirmatory of the tenor of this correspondence, however, is Lella Florence's *Birth Control on Trial* (1930), a study of the first 300 women, mostly working class, to attend the new Cambridge Birth Control Clinic. Examining the attitudes of a group of women interested in limiting their family size, the book tells a similar story to that found in the letters to Stopes. The women express a generalized state of sexual anxiety and ignorance, and a profound fear of further pregnancy. Florence confirms the still widespread recourse to *coitus interruptus*, but also reports the practice's emotional cost (1930: 90, 105).³ Many women reported feeling 'very great anxiety, which results in nervous tension and strain' owing to its effect on their own sexual pleasure; 'even though they were extremely fond of their husbands, they felt intense resentment, amounting almost to hatred, when this interruption deprived them of a proper climax' (ibid.: 103). Fear of pregnancy was also a major determinant of the ethos of their sexual relationship with their husbands:

Many wives have told me how the dread of pregnancy haunts their lives like a nightmare, how they dare not show any affection for their husbands for fear it will lead to sex indulgence; how, when they can no longer 'put off' their husbands, they think of nothing except a possible 'accident'; the endearments of wife to husband take the form of: 'Do hurry up!' 'Do be careful!' 'Don't be so long!' 'I'm sure you're not going to be in time!' The whole act, which ought to be a happy expression of their love for each

other, becomes a strained and miserable business, more often than not resulting in quarrels, ill-temper, and worry. (ibid.: 104)

Marie Paneth, a social worker in London during the blitz, worked with children who also 'reproduced shouts and quarrels which they must have witnessed when sharing their mother's room and probably her bed "You beast, I've had enough of it. Don't hurt me. Let me alone," and worse' (Paneth 1944: 41). Accounts such as these, shot through with anger and fear, clarify the appeal of Stopes's high-flown romantic characterizations of the marital sexual encounter and of her promise of its accessibility to all, but they also throw into sharp relief the widespread interest in her advocacy of contraception. While fear of pregnancy was not the only determinant of the still-prevalent culture of marital continence, it clearly remained central: 'The wife always felt the necessity of restraining any demonstrations of affection for her husband, and of meeting his affectionate overtures with coldness and rebuff, until gradually there grew up an icy barrier between them which both felt and recognized, but which they could not alter so long as abstinence was enforced' (Florence 1930: 119–20). The result, Florence concludes, has been the normalization of continence and abstinence in marriage:

It was a genuine surprise to me to find how many couples indulge only moderately: how many habitually leave intervals of two, four, or six weeks; how many, in reply to my question, answered, 'oh, three or four times a year'; how many others practise abstinence over long periods – six months or a year, after the birth of a child; and how many others have adopted abstinence permanently. (ibid.: 118)

Reporting a still taken-for-granted acceptance of a life lived long-term on a continuum of restraint, contemporary accounts such as this confirm the proposition of a thoroughgoing and deep-seated 'culture of abstinence'.

The sexually restrained culture to which Szreter and Florence, among others, bear witness was doubtless far from monolithic, but as varied and as susceptible to change as the ideological, material and social conditions in which modes of sexual life were forged and lived out. The late nineteenth-century idealization of marital continence, for instance, was a far cry from the pragmatic, normalized, angry, resigned or fearful continence of the 1920s. This notwithstanding, it is also the case that abstinence remained available long into the twentieth century as a common expectation of marriage, whether as marital resource or marital problem, or – not uncommonly – as both. One commentator, E. L. Packer (a probation officer), writing about working-class sexual attitudes in 1947, found that 'the normal attitude towards copulation before marriage is one of indifference and disgust', and that 'indifference

and dislike of sexual intercourse is the norm of the attitude of working-class wives who have consulted the writer. "I can do without it always," "it doesn't interest me; we've had it four times in ten years," "He's always messing you about," are typical statements' (Packer 1947: 98). In this context, continence might have figured as a socially validated mechanism for the avoidance of sexual contact experienced as distasteful or repugnant.

As late as the 1950s, the reverberations of such sentiments could still be felt. Elizabeth Roberts's oral history of working-class women in the north-west of England found striking evidence that, even 'at such a comparatively late date, sexual abstinence in marriage was equated with "behaving yourself"' (1984: 84). Her interviews suggested that:

the two most common methods of family limitation were total abstinence and coitus interruptus; this would seem to be true of the later as well as the earlier period. ... Abstinence was sometimes voluntary, sometimes as a result of one of the partners being ill, and sometimes forced on the couple by overcrowding. Sometimes it was due to successful evading tactics practised by the wife. (ibid.: 95)

Roberts's study implies, in effect, the longevity of British cultural attitudes towards abstinence as a commonplace part of marital sexuality extending from the late Victorian period to the post-war period, and epitomized by its equation of abstinence with 'behaving yourself' (see too Faulkner 1992). Perhaps it continued even as far as the famous watershed of 1963, the date immortalized by Philip Larkin as the moment at which 'sexual intercourse began/ ... Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban/And the Beatles' first LP' (1974: 34).⁴ The speaker's sense of melancholic regret at being too old to participate in the more carefree sexual behaviours of the 1960s, condemned by his age and perhaps his temperament to be only a wistful bystander, has resonated such that these lines have become a touchstone for pinpointing British society's change of sexual gear. However, enduringly resonant as these lines are, it is the next stanza of Larkin's poem which condenses the ethos of the hitherto prevalent culture of sexual abstinence only belatedly coming to an end:

Up till then there'd only been
A sort of bargaining,
A wrangle for a ring,
A shame that started at sixteen
And spread to everything. (ibid.)

Bargaining, wrangling and shame: a whole pervasive cultural ethos is adumbrated in these three sadly impoverished and mean-spirited elements.

Moreover, the fact that there was awareness only of 'a *sort of* bargaining' as one of the cornerstones of intimate relationships identifies its rules and practices as semi-conscious, barely enunciated.

The poem's reference to a 'wrangle for a ring' is a reminder that the culture of abstinence was not only to be found at an affective or emotional level. This was also a material culture, constructed as well as mediated by the artefacts among which it was lived out – here, the presence or absence of a wedding ring, and elsewhere by the commonplace effects of daily life. Carolyn Steedman's critical history and memoir *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986) tells one such story, of the quid pro quo existing between motherhood and materiality. Her account turns on an exploration of the ways in which her mother's aspirations for happiness in post-war, post-austerity Britain were condensed in her longing for a New Look dress. Even as a young child, Steedman understands 'that dresses needing twenty yards for a skirt were items as expensive as children – more expensive really, because after 1948 babies came relatively cheap, on tides of free milk and orange juice, but good cloth in any quantity was hard to find' (Steedman 1986: 29). Her children represent an insuperable barrier between Steedman's mother and the New Look dress that represents all her disparate personal, social and material longings. This dynamic of yearning and resentment is mapped out in one indicative incident, when her mother's gaze travels from a woman wearing a full-skirted dress down to her own straight-skirted suit, 'and then at us [her children], the two living barriers to twenty yards of cloth' (ibid.: 30). Steedman's analysis suggests the complex relation between the material and psychic, for to desire a New Look dress was to long for so much more than an item of clothing. Its 'twenty yards of cloth' represented fashion, glamour and extravagance, the opposite of the 'make do' mentality that had prevailed through the 1940s. But it also promised the plenitude of an imagined and somehow replete self – it is significant that the skirt in question is a 'full' one – in contrast to the scrimping paucity and lack felt to define the circumstances in which she was currently obliged to live. The New Look dress gives form to a complex set of inchoate wishes, its impossibility serving as a touchstone of compromise, regret and envy.

Reading accounts of material lack through the lens of Steedman's study fleshes out the already poignant narratives and oral histories of married life from the middle years of the twentieth century. It conveys a sense of the emotional investments in and costs of the material environments in which these lives were lived. Lella Florence notes that most of the patients who attended the Cambridge birth-control clinic 'live in tiny, overcrowded houses' with no bathrooms, so that 'the woman has no place in the house where she can go in privacy and be alone, much less where she can prepare and administer a douche' (1930: 65). Douching – still a fundamental dimension of many birth-control regimes – was either not feasible or simply too awkward

in houses with no bathroom. This lack of space and privacy extended to the sleeping arrangements. Not only was there 'never an opportunity for a separate room for husband and wife, or even a separate bed', but couples 'more often than not share their bedroom with several children' (ibid.: 121). The idea of consciously managing marital intimacy through the adjustment of proximity and distance facilitated by the introduction of twin beds, let alone of Stopes's preferred arrangement of a marital double paired with a single in another room, had no chance of realization in such cramped domestic environments.

In these circumstances, as in those of Steedman's mother, the number of children stood in starkly direct relation to the material comfort of the domestic environment. One woman said to Lella Florence, 'When my sixth baby was born the doctor comes in and he says to me, "You've got a nice little boy. Did you want a little boy?" And I says to him, "No. I'd rather have a chest of drawers"' (1930: 130). Not only would she have preferred the new piece of furniture, but the extra mouth to feed meant that the chance of getting it receded still further into the future. This weary and reluctant mother was acutely aware that a new baby had a direct – and probably terminal – impact on the longed-for chest of drawers, along with whatever that represented psychically. Parental feelings did not inhabit a domain separate from the environment in which parents and children were to live. The two cohabited in a more or less explicit way, and – as Steedman's history, Florence's clients and Stopes's correspondents confirm – the more straitened the circumstances, the more conscious was the relationship between the material and the affective.

If the cost of raising a child could be set so knowingly against the acquisition of a new piece of clothing or furniture, then how much more immediately might the presence of twin beds or a double have figured in the intimate emotional dynamics of married life? Accessing first-hand accounts of this is not easy, but newspapers shed some light on the way that double beds and twins were interpreted in the configuration of a marriage and its intimacies. Reports of divorce cases frequently mention twin beds, but they figure variously in these glimpsed narratives of loyalty and adultery, guilt and innocence, longing and disappointment. The *Times*, for example, reports a 1938 case, where Major Thompson and the co-respondent Miss Causton were said by a servant to have shared a twin-bedded room. This proved to be a significant element in the judge's finding: he declared himself 'regretfully forced to the conclusion that the respondent and the intervener had had mutual intercourse amounting to adultery in law' (*Times* 1 April 1938: 4), and this despite the presence of medical documents to the effect that Miss Causton was *virgo intacta*. The presence of twin beds rather than a double did not signal an asexual encounter to the judge. On the contrary, the beds were clearly material to his conclusion that adultery had taken place. Ten years later, however, in a divorce

case reported in the *Daily Mirror*, an ambiguous reference to a husband's choice of twin beds both signals a sexually unsatisfactory marriage and indicates an adulterous response to it: 'Twin beds which had caused some trouble between them when bought by him in 1939 had been pushed into a corner and joined together' (24 July 1947: 8) by the allegedly adulterous wife. In this instance, the inferences were unambiguous. The twin beds were indicators of the husband's failure to consummate the marriage and a source of conflict between husband and wife, while the joining of them together was interpreted as evidence of the wife taking of her sexual pleasure with other men in his absence.

To these judges, twin beds just as easily indicated adultery as they did non-consummation. Their pronouncements suggest that the presence of twin beds in a marriage was not irrelevant, but that it had no necessary or inherent meaning. They were understood as players in the sexual relationship of the couple whose marital breakdown was under scrutiny, but as ambiguous ones. It simply depended on what kind of interpretative framework was brought to bear on the phenomenon: twin beds as a historically specific, fashionable, popular and unremarkable alternative to the marital double, on the one hand, or, on the other, a sleeping arrangement that hindered the sexual relationship of the married couple by physically separating them. One judge foregrounded the proximity of the two beds, their framing of their inhabitants as a couple, the other focused on the distance between them, the beds' separation of the spouses.

At times, judges permitted themselves to speak out not only on the particularities of the case they were adjudicating but also more generally on the implications of twin beds in a marriage. Once again, however, even well into the post-war period when the cultural tide was beginning to turn against twin beds, there was no agreement as to just what these implications might be. In 1946, for example, a headline in the *Daily Mirror* read 'Judge Says Twin Beds Help To Make Rush of Divorces' (9 July 1946: 3), under which was reported Judge Thesiger's suggestion that 'the old double bed has almost gone out of fashion' and his opinion that this was contributing to the rise in the number of divorces. However, in 1950 another judge, Sir Reginald Sharpe, decided that separate beds could not be used as evidence of a withdrawal from the marriage: 'Twin beds in the bedroom of a husband and wife are indistinguishable from a double bed and form the "matrimonial bed"; a divorce commissioner said in London yesterday' (*Daily Mirror* 14 December 1950: 5). The *Mirror* periodically reported on cases in the American courts commenting on twin-bedded marriages: in 1944, a Chicago judge reportedly said that 'the introduction of twin beds into the marital boudoir has caused dissension, disunity and distrust, quarrelling, trouble and laxity in parental supervision.' She concluded that 'Divided beds mean divided families' (11 April 1944:

2).⁵ And as late as 1967, a divorce court judge found that twin beds did not represent 'a complete withdrawal from sex life', even though the husband 'had been so informed by some of his married friends' (*Times* 11 March 1967: 2). This ambiguity of interpretation (twin beds are divisive; twin beds are indistinguishable from a double) is not to argue that during the half-century or so during which twin beds achieved the status of the commonplace they were neutral or culturally invisible objects, for throughout their lengthy heyday they had their critics as well as their advocates. Instead, it is to suggest that they compacted the capacity to signify simultaneously something in harmony with a marital ideal as well as something at odds with it. Judges, like everyone else, could not agree on what to make of them.

If judges disagreed on how to assess the significance of twin beds in a marriage, they shared their ambivalence with the respondents participating in two studies from the post-war period which address the question of the 'double or twin?' directly. Both were associated with Mass-Observation, the project started in 1937 by Charles Madge, Humphrey Jennings and Tom Harrisson and intended as an exercise in 'anthropology at home' (Hubble 2006: 4), collecting and analysing information about everyday life in Britain from volunteer participants as well as from surveys. The first was the article by E. L. Packer already mentioned, 'Aspects of Working-Class Marriage', published in 1947 in *Pilot Papers*, a journal set up by Madge as a forum for sociological essays by non-academics; the second was a Mass-Observation File Report of 1947 on 'The State of Matrimony'.⁶

Packer's study of working-class marriages includes a section on 'The Double Bed'. His starting point – quite contrary to Judge Thesiger's, despite being contemporaneous with it – was that 'the double bed, which is very much a national institution, has contributed to the failure to achieve sexual harmony ... [as] continuous physical contact in time is productive of boredom and satiety' (1947: 100–1). Far from the double promoting sexual and emotional intimacy, as its champions argue, Packer suggests that it actually compromises it. Furthermore, he observes that the bed is actively deployed in the daily disputes of married life: 'To quit the marriage bed is a weapon frequently used by married couples when serious quarrels have occurred. ... [B]ecause of its implications relative to the refusal of intercourse, it is a gesture of considerable weight' (ibid.: 101). Here is corroborative evidence of Larkin's suggestion that relationships turn on 'a sort of bargaining' and of Szreter's identification of 'bargaining between husbands and wives over the terms and conditions on which sexuality was enjoyed in marriage' (1996: 578), although enjoyment seems manifestly less at issue in the negotiations than control. Cutting across the culture of abstinence, and related to it, was strategic sexual acquiescence and denial, a process fought out in and over the marriage bed itself.

Packer drew on first-hand material deriving from his work as a probation officer as well as on published studies of marriage, and addressed himself particularly to the place of the double bed in working-class marriages. A Mass-Observation report of the same year on 'The State of Matrimony' included a section called 'Single or Double', which picked up on Packer's findings and added to them, for 'the tradition of the double bed ... is a matter of some importance in considering the changes in social outlook surrounding marriage today' (File Report 2495 'The State of Matrimony', 20 June 1947: 12). Drawing on submissions from Mass-Observation respondents, the report concludes that most people, male and female, married and single, prefer double beds. Only about one in three 'said single beds were best' (ibid.). The reasons given for these preferences are tabulated 'in rough order of frequency':

Prefer Double Beds

Should be, this is marriage
Sexual spontaneity etc.
Makes for happier marriage
Habit; always have used one
Keeps you together (psychologically)
Warmer
Usual thing, normal
More friendly, more intimate
More comfortable
More fun

Prefer Single Beds

Healthier, more hygienic
Less disturbance, more sleep
Cooler
Modern idea
More privacy
More comfortable
More freedom

(ibid.: 13)

Devotees of both modes of co-sleeping claim their preference to be the 'more comfortable', although this is not high on their lists. But the other reasons given – which coalesce, one might infer, into the respective claims of greater comfort – are telling. Those favouring double beds prioritize tradition and convention ('should be, this is marriage', 'habit', 'usual thing, normal') while those preferring twins still identify their choice as 'modern' and offer this as a reason for their preference. Tradition brings with it a version of marriage close to that eulogized by Stopes in the notion of the merged pair or 'duity': sexual spontaneity is high on the list, but other understandings of what constitutes the ground of that merging also figure: warmth, intimacy, fun, friendship and psychological proximity.

For respondents favouring twins, the reasons are different. Strikingly, health and hygiene continue as the primary rationale, fifty years after the end of the sanitary 'craze' which initially prompted their introduction. If the

claim of the greater comfort of twins is calibrated with other considerations, however, this seems to emerge not from marital merging but from twin beds' ability to sustain autonomy within the pair: less disturbance, greater privacy and freedom. These evaluations are endorsed elsewhere in the report: other respondents gloss the double as 'the emblem of married life', while twins 'don't seem like being married' (ibid.). Perhaps fearing the 'freedom' claimed by twin-bed sleepers, one working-class husband offered the tantalizingly opaque suggestion that in single beds 'the husband and wife might get suspicious of one another' (ibid.: 14). To him, twin beds indicate a state of disconcerting unknowing: incomplete knowledge and hidden truths which could not exist in a double.

Two interrelated features stand out in this post-war interest in twin beds. First, this mode of married sleeping re-emerged as a topic worthy of comment, and even of study: press discussion of twin beds increased, whether in reports of divorce cases, in letters' pages, or in feature articles, and Mass-Observation turned their attention to them as a distinctly modern phenomenon. While twin beds had had considerable cultural visibility in the interwar period, whether in Hollywood film, at Ideal Home exhibitions or in Heal's publicity materials, this had not prompted much comment in the press or in household advice books, beyond their desirability as either fashionable or convenient furnishing choices. They could be seen in the stores and in the bedroom, but there seemed to be little to say about them, at least in these forums. After a flurry of attention when they had come into vogue in the late nineteenth century, they achieved a degree of familiarity or normality (to use Stopes's term) which rendered them, for the most part, largely beyond discussion until after the Second World War.

Secondly, and related, the interwar silence on the place of twin beds in marriage – Stopes's was a lone voice inveighing against them as enemy agents in the field of marital harmony – gave way, gradually and unevenly, to discussion of them as objects that signified overwhelmingly within the domain of marriage. Judges Thesiger and Sharpe, and the participants in and compilers of the Mass-Observation studies, were confident that the choice of marital bed – double or twins – communicated something important about those who chose one arrangement over another. None suggested that the issue was irrelevant to the marriages of the couple concerned, but nor could they agree on quite what that meaning might be. To some, twins spoke of individual autonomy, of peace, of an intimate proximity without intrusion or disturbance. To others, the space between the beds represented a symbolically insuperable barrier to the free flow of interconnection, whether sexual, tactile, emotional or verbal. Should twin beds be read as signs of a commitment to autonomy in the service of intimacy, or of an intrusion into a space and time that should more properly be dedicated to marital 'togetherness'? What distribution of

proximity and distance best represented the aspirations of those seeking happy and fulfilling marriages? This, in essence, was the dilemma governing the discussion of twin beds in this period of ambivalence, the twenty-five years following the Second World War. It was not that participants in the discussion rejected the idea that twin beds spoke of marriage. They just disagreed as to whether the space between the beds was productive of benign autonomy or malign separation.

This discussion took an unusually literal and detailed form in the pages of the *Observer* newspaper. In May 1964, a letter was published from a woman whose husband, after nineteen years of sleeping soundly in the marital double, has announced that he wants single beds. 'Am I mistaken in thinking that those who sleep apart, grow apart?' she asks. 'Or does the average husband in his fifties long for dignified, solitary slumber?' (*Observer* 31 May 1964: 33). The letter-writer signs herself 'Puzzled Wife', suggesting confusion about what her husband's desire for twin beds says about their marriage, and her recourse to a pseudonym suggesting anxiety about publicly owning up to his request. In 1964, the year after Larkin's 'annus mirabilis', it is still a matter of some uncertainty, at least to the *Observer*-reading class, whether her husband's wish for twin beds ought to give her concern.

A fortnight later, readers' responses to Puzzled Wife's letter were published under the headline of 'Double – or Quit' (*Observer* 14 June 1964: 31). As that title suggests, the choice of marriage bed is a gamble. The letters from readers offer no consensus on the better option: 'There was no agreement, and Puzzled Wife will remain as puzzled as she was at the start'. Some readers excoriate twin beds, others applaud them; some find the double a haven of intimacy and 'togetherness', while others lament the intrusiveness and poor sleep it brings with it. One reader contributed a lengthy elaboration of the premise that 'those who sleep apart are already apart in some other way', and suggesting renewed attempts at spousal communication: 'It may be heavy going at first but if you love each other the double bed may yet prevail.' A man who had swapped to twins lamented the loss of intimacy but concluded gloomily that, once that particular marital Rubicon had been crossed, there was no going back: 'no more confidential murmurings, instead an invisible barrier across which one talks as if addressing a public meeting'. Not all were convinced by the idea that the double bed conferred a unique kind of intimacy. One correspondent dismissed 'sleeping together (in the unfashionable literal sense)' as 'just about the most absent-minded kind of togetherness imaginable, and any relationship that depends upon it can scarcely be worth preserving. The double bed is merely a marital symbol' (ibid.). Evaluations of the double ranged from finding it an incomparable

site of marital communication to dismissing it as a meaningless emblem of union.

As much attention was given to twins as to the double, however, with several readers writing enthusiastically in their favour. For some they were just a pragmatic measure to improve sleep quality by serving as a counter to snoring, cold feet, sharp elbows and cover-thieving, but others celebrated twins more overtly as a source of delight in themselves. One letter, signed by an 'Adoring Husband', sent news from his twin bed of unanticipated pleasures: 'Often when my wife wakes up, she shoots out a toe which I endeavour to grab, and waggle it with joy!' Nor are the pleasures more conventionally associated with the bedroom beyond the remit of twin beds. One reader was moved to verse by her nineteen years of enthusiastic twin-bedded marriage:

As for thinking that Romance goes out with the 'Twin,'
Believe me, it very much beckons it in.
A come-hither look, and a frank invitation,
Is far more exciting than forced situation.
I could list other reasons, but won't be a bore.
A Twin Bed Supporter, and Mother of Four. (ibid.)

As the article's prefatory warning predicts, no agreement emerges among the *Observer's* readers. Some insist that only the double can offer the kind of intimacy necessary to sustain a marriage. Others find twins not only better in terms of the quality of sleep they allow, but also, as in the final example, as straightforwardly productive of the circumstances – 'A come-hither look, and a frank invitation' – that generate and sustain romantic and sexual interest across the years. The jury is, at this point, still very much out about the meaning of marital twin beds.

The *Observer* article deems readers to have responded to Puzzled Wife's letter in three ways: 'romantically, realistically or severely practically' (ibid.). Some readers prioritize the sexual and emotional dimension of the marriage in their answers; others accept the shortcomings and compromises of a less-than-perfect situation; others still, perhaps bypassing the emotional altogether, respond to Puzzled Wife with a brisk pragmatism. These attitudes, however, by no means divide straightforwardly between champions of the double responding romantically and advocates of the twin favouring a more pragmatic approach. Indeed, the most joyful romantic contributions come from twin-bed enthusiasts.

This balancing of the romantic and the pragmatic in readers' evaluations of the conjugal dynamic chimes with questions of the place more generally of romance and pragmatism in marriage in the post-war period. *The English*

in Love, Claire Langhamer's study of the evolution of the twentieth-century companionate marriage, analyses precisely this question, examining changing ideas about the proper basis of a marriage. In its interwar manifestation, she suggests, people accommodated pragmatism in their expectations of marriage. Love and companionship were important, certainly, but so too, in these pre-Welfare-State days, were economic and domestic security. Long-term, one's romantic partner might also become one's carer, whether financially or physically. This interwar model of the companionate marriage, argues Langhamer, was re-inflected after the war (and, indeed, because of it), in favour of a new investment in 'togetherness' to the exclusion of pragmatism. Now, all was staked on love. Care of a practical kind, relating to income, health and old age, was increasingly relocated to new kinds of state provision, and so an accommodation of pragmatism regarding these elements of care was no longer widely accepted as necessary. Sensibility won the day over sense (Langhamer 2013: 1–60)

Enmeshed in this broad spectrum of change was a related one, concerning the meaning of sexual abstinence or continence in marriage. Despite the insistence of advisers that marriage was unlikely to flourish without a mutually satisfying sexual relationship. Langhamer argues that in the interwar period the giving of 'care' within marriage was often understood to take the form of sexual moderation or abstinence, glossed (in Elizabeth Roberts's terms) as 'being careful', 'being good' or 'not bothering me' (Roberts 1984: 38–49). Lesley Hall's work on the place of abstinence in British marriages in this period chimes with Langhamer's. For many women, she concludes, 'lack of sexual interest if not complete revulsion was more or less standard', and she quotes a number of surveys in which a husband was praised when he did not 'bother me much' (Hall 2011: 92, 93). Such attitudes prevailed until after the Second World War when, in the context of post-war ideas of togetherness, an absence of sex was increasingly widely interpreted as meaning a loveless and dysfunctional marriage (*ibid.*: 88; Langhamer 2013: 6–7).

How do such shifts in the evaluation of the balance between pragmatism and romanticism in the post-war marriage, entailing a reinterpretation of the presence or absence of a moderated or 'managed' sexual relationship, articulate with the choice of double or twin? Strikingly, the renewed interest in the implications of this choice and the eventual hardening of attitudes against twins and in favour of the double coincided with two other distinctive cultural phenomena: first, the cultural endorsement of romantic love as the only proper basis of marriage and the concomitant downgrading of pragmatism as playing its rightful part in the forging of unions; and second, the recommendation of marital 'togetherness' as the principal basis on which marriage should be conducted. Together, these factors helped cement the status of the double as

the natural and healthy sleeping arrangement in marriage, and helped to stack the increasingly univocal case against twins.

However, while those marrying in the post-war period might have increasingly eschewed pragmatism in favour of love alone as a basis of their union, couples maintaining those relationships longer term, which is what the *Observer's* correspondents were discussing (several note their decades of marital experience in their letters), still find themselves exercised by its pragmatics. The marriage may have been forged in the white heat of togetherness, but for many it was sustained by a judicious application of pragmatism. For some, this meant the introduction of twin beds as a way to manage the intrusions of a too-insistent proximity, manifested in snoring and cold feet. For others, it meant treating the double bed as a therapeutic couch, 'the place to know each other better in every sense. The place to know oneself better. The place to express all one's feelings, the nasty as well as the nice' (*Observer* 14 June 1964: 31). Long-term intimacy, the *Observer* letters suggest, is tricky and needs to be approached via the active management – whether romantically or pragmatically – of proximity and distance.

The sexual revolution was slow to complete its changes to the ways in which twin beds were evaluated. The sexual advice manuals which replaced the earlier marriage advice books – the most famous of which was Alex Comfort's *The Joy of Sex* (1972) – explicitly repudiated twin beds: these 'have no place in a full sexual relationship'. Instead, the cornucopia of promised sexual riches was to be discovered on 'a full-size double bed', although 'really enthusiastic sex usually involves at one time or another almost every piece of furniture in the house, at least experimentally' (Comfort [1972] 1974: 14). Such advice is distinct, however, from the *marital* counsel which continued to be dispensed in other forums. In the pages of *Woman* magazine, it was delivered by the redoubtable Marje Proops, addressing a rather different constituency of interest.⁷ Proops's column addressed (though not exclusively) a middle-aged readership, as well as those embarking on their sexual or marital careers. And here, from her position as straight-talking elder stateswoman of the company of agony aunts, Proops mounts a late but spirited defence of twin beds as an honourable choice in a marriage. In 1967 – the year of the Summer of Love, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and the decriminalization of both homosexuality and abortion – readers remained exercised by the enduring and thorny problem of the proper distribution of proximity and distance, companionship and intimacy, in a long-term marriage. Proops devotes a full page to answering a letter from a reader happily married for twelve years but nonetheless struggling with sharing a bed with her husband, each spouse complaining of the other's nocturnal teeth-grinding, sleep-talking and cover-stealing. Changing to two

singles is the obvious next step, she writes, but 'the gloomy forecasts of relatives and friends prophesying a swift end to our marriage has made us nervous' (*Woman* 25 February 1967: 13). Proops will have none of it. She refutes the received wisdom frequently mobilized in favour of the double that it is impossible to maintain a quarrel in one, parrying with the view that 'it's just as easy to keep a frosty distance in a 4 ft. 6 in. double as it is in a 3 ft. single with a narrow gap between'. She continues:

I don't think it makes one darned bit of difference to a happy marriage if a couple sleep in one bed or two. There is something to be said in favour of each.

A double is, of course, cosier. Singles are, perhaps, more practical if one or both are very restless or very greedy with the blankets. The maddening nocturnal noises you'll hear in either. (*ibid.*)

Romance and practicality are here invoked again, this time lined up respectively with double and twins. But pragmatism still, for Proops, has its place, and does not compromise a 'happy marriage'. Intimacy can thrive in twins but be absent in the 'cosier' double.

Few such stalwart defenders as Proops would speak up for twin beds thereafter. She was writing towards the end of the post-war age of ambivalence, the extended cultural moment during which press comment on twin beds was as likely to find them as satisfactorily intimate as a double as it was to reject them as a sign of marital dysfunction. There is in her response a slightly exasperated tone, as if she is aware that she is fighting a rearguard action, speaking against the naysayers who prophesy doom to a twin-bedded marriage. The moment of cultural authority for the apologists of twin beds – a surprisingly protracted one, lasting the best part of a century – was almost at an end, as agreement was gradually reached about the pernicious intervention made by twin beds in a marriage. By now, apologists for the double included not only those persuaded of the virtues of marital togetherness, but also those rejecting marriage as a bourgeois straitjacket and agitating for sexual revolution. Twin beds had finally had their day as a sleeping arrangement accorded the dignity of being taken seriously.

Proops's column can be read indicatively as the last gasp of twin-bedded advocacy. After a century in which the merits of this mode of marital co-sleeping had at times been vigorously debated, at others taken for granted and deemed no more contentious than the wingback chair or the kitchen table, broad consensus against them was coalescing, and they were soon relegated to the guest bedroom and the hotel room, or associated with the bizarre sexual mores of a previous generation. The century during which they had jostled for position with the double in the marital bedroom was drawing

to a close, their claim to dignity and desirability finally extinguished in the post-war climate of conjugal togetherness. Ironically, their death knell was sounded by an ideology now generally seen as deeply conservative in its investment in a narrowly restrictive inflection of the companionate marriage and nuclear family, and particularly so for the women who were enjoined to derive their satisfactions entirely within its bounds (Nicholson [2015] 2016: 203–11). Twin beds were rejected as misguided, retrograde and inimical to marital happiness in narrowly normative models of the couple and the family themselves later rejected as oppressive and leading to unhappiness, at least for the women constrained by their terms of reference.

Irony too is twin beds' post-hoc reputation as the symptom and agents of sexual prudery. While their heyday broadly coincides with Simon Szreter's long period of culturally validated sexual abstinence, the evidence examined in this chapter makes clear that abstinence by no means maps simply or monolithically on to a prudish unwillingness to engage sexually. Rather, twin beds emerge as objects that could be mobilized to contribute to many differing conversations about the meanings and regulation of sex in marriage. These figure within a range of situations and suggest an array of emotional responses ranging from indifference and disgust to marital delight and adulterous lust. They excited sexual desire in Mrs J. and her husband in 1918 just as they did for the versifying celebrant of twin beds who wrote to *Observer* in 1964. They could be introduced to fend off the too-enthusiastic sexual appetite of a spouse, as noted by judges in the divorce courts in the 1940s, or they could be chosen by spouses seeking to discipline their own desires, as had Mr and Mrs J. in 1918. They might have served as a contraceptive technology, aimed at reinforcing continence and limiting pregnancies. And they may too have been adopted as a sign of love and care offered by one spouse to the other, signifying a willingness to 'not bother' them sexually, or by being willing to recognize the off-putting effects of cold feet or snoring.

To reduce this set of quite nuanced engagements with the sexual environment of marriage to prudery is in danger of naming it as a choice driven by simple sexual repression rather than as a social or cultural phenomenon. Prudery suggests neurotic retreat, hysteria and a host of other psychopathologies from the Freudian lexicon. The materials discussed in this chapter suggest instead that twin beds bear witness to a century of socio-sexual, more than individual, anxieties, ranging from ignorance of or indifference to women's sexual pleasure, fear of multiple pregnancies and the continuation until the advent of the Welfare State of the accommodation of pragmatic as well as romantic considerations in marriage. If marriage included aspects of social and financial care as well as personal and emotional, then

twin beds are themselves more easily legible as signifying socially rather than individually.

This chapter has traced the social contexts of twentieth-century sexual abstinence or continence in marriage and their correlations or associations with the marital cultures tracked by historians and sociologists and underwritten by the British press. The next chapter presses this study towards its conclusion by examining the literary response to twin beds as a register of their emotional connotations. If the press fought shy of a frank engagement with the sexual associations of twin beds, might we find a fuller exploration of this relation in the twentieth century's imaginative writing?