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2020

Elizabeth Bishop's Perspectives on Marriage

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CHAPTER THREE

ELIZABETH BISHOP'S PERSPECTIVES ON MARRIAGE

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Marriage can never be renewed except by that which is always the source of true marriage: that two human beings reveal the You to one another.

—Martin Buber

In a number of texts, both published and unpublished, Elizabeth Bishop addresses the themes of marriage, love, and courtship. Such issues were vexed ones for her. As a young woman, she rejected Robert Seaver's marriage proposal (Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop* 112). Later, her friend Pauline Hemingway wondered in a letter whether she and Tom Wanning were engaged (Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop* 201), and Robert Lowell famously confessed to her that she was the one who got away (*WIA* 225-26).¹ Given that Bishop's most important romantic relationships were lesbian at a time when same-sex relationships (much less marriages) were not socially sanctioned, Bishop had to confront the issue of marriage and adopt a quasi-public stance toward it to pursue a career as a professional writer.² In Frank Bidart's words,

One must remember that for the vast majority of her life, in both social and literary terms, *not* to be in the closet was to be ghettoized; people might know or suspect that one was gay, but to talk about it openly in straight society was generally considered out-of-control or stupid. . . . Out of her distrust of the straight world she didn't want people to know she was gay. (*REB* 327)

Stephen Vider provides a general context for thinking about Bidart's comments. In the America of the 1950s and 1960s, Vider writes, "[a]dapting to marriage

became not only socially desirable—it was widely understood as developmentally normal. As heterosexual marriage was made a mark of maturity, homosexuality was increasingly understood as a neurosis: a symptom of maladjustment” (703). Three unpublished archival documents (two stories and a letter Bishop wrote to her psychoanalyst Ruth Foster) provide important insights into Bishop’s attitudes toward marriage and her resistance to the medical designation of homosexuality as neurotic.

Bishop’s letters demonstrate that she felt the social pressure of other people’s expectations that she should marry. On March 11, 1941, for instance, Bishop wryly pointed out to Frani Blough that her housekeeper, Mrs. Almyda, wants her to have a baby (OA 99), and in 1948, she joked with Lowell about finding her a husband, writing that “I’d settle for some form of dignified concubinage as long as it was guaranteed” (WIA 49). In what follows, I address Bishop’s treatment of this topic primarily in the context of letters and unpublished work, including two virtually undiscussed stories from the Vassar archives, “Eula Wiggle” (VC 53.19) and “The River-Rat” (VC 53.4), to account for a pattern of indirection she displays regarding the institution, or enterprise, to borrow terms used by Bishop’s mentor, Marianne Moore, in her own important long poem about marriage (Moore, *New Collected Poems* 63). In particular, these two stories reveal that marriage was on Bishop’s mind not only as material for fiction and poetry but also as a matter to reckon with in personal terms. The unpublished stories can enrich and deepen our sense of Bishop’s attitude toward marriage and same-sex desire in relation to her own long-term “marriages” with women, her ambitions as a professional writer, and her fraught relationship to home and travel.

In several texts, courting characters or married spouses are observed and commented on by a narrator so that Bishop can treat the topic through a distanced perspective, such as in the poem “House Guest” as well as in the two unpublished stories.³ In the first two “Songs for a Colored Singer,” moreover, Bishop invents a persona who expresses her dissatisfaction with marriage, which has gotten so bad that she is “going to go and take the bus / and find someone monogamous” (PPL 37). In “Roosters,” Bishop tartly comments on the subordination and even disposability of wives. The title character of “Penelope Gwin” blithely informs her listeners that “This family life is not for me” (EAP 3). In addition, a youthful Bishop published “The Thumb,” the story of a courtship that goes singularly awry. The character-narrator of this story is a suitor who is both attracted to and repelled by the woman he pursues. In the posthumously published story “Was It in His Hand?” two female friends (the narrator being one of them) consult a psychic who assumes they want to know what their future husbands will be like (PPL 558). As she indicates in an unpublished letter to her psychoanalyst Ruth

Foster, Bishop watched at least one woman whom she cared for, Judy Flynn, lose her intellectual liveliness after many years of marriage (VC 188.33). Finally, in “Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle,” dated 1978, she wittily figures marriage as “One flesh and two heads” (PPL 264).

Bishop humorously expresses dismay regarding marriage in work she composed even before she attended college. The protagonist of “Penelope Gwin” eschews marriage in favor of travel and cosmopolitan culture:

I introduce Penelope Gwin,
A friend of mine through thick and thin,
Who’s travelled much in foreign parts
Pursuing culture and the arts.
“And also,” says Penelope
“This family life is not for me.
I find it leads to deep depression.
And I was born for self expression.” (EAP 3)

As Alice Quinn points out, the name of Bishop’s heroine plays on the word *penguin* (Pen Gwin), an association reinforced by the picture of a penguin on the manuscript copy of the poem reproduced in *Edgar Allan Poe & the Juke-Box* (EAP 3). Bishop inserts the underlined words “Our Heroine” as a caption beneath the picture. As Quinn explains, moreover, Penelope’s surname plays on *gouinne*, a French slang word for lesbian (EAP 244). Near the end of the poem, Penelope humorously confirms her commitment to remaining unmarried:

Of course, while in Romantic France
I met with Cupid and Romance.
One glimpse at my rejected suitor—
He was a handsome German tutor.
But no! I would be no man’s wife,
The stark reality of life
For me, and he was past his prime.
His mouth hung open half the time.
It gave my senses quite a jolt
To find he had begun to molt. . . . (EAP 4; ellipses in original)

In these amusing lines, Bishop treats the topics of marriage and female independence comically, but her heroine also takes a definite stand against heterosexual marriage to defend Gwin’s preference for travel and cosmopolitan culture. The

Adrienne Rich of “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” would have recognized Penelope Gwin as a marriage resister (*Blood* 56).

One may compare the breezy humor of “Gwin” with the darker tone of “The Thumb,” a short story that echoes Hawthorne’s “The Birthmark” and Poe’s “Imp of the Perverse.” In both the light verse and the unsettling and accomplished short story, Bishop repudiates the institution of marriage as unsuitable or unavailing to certain persons. In the poem, Bishop portrays Gwin as a free-spirited alter ego who finds her bourgeois aunts to be irrelevant and oppressive. Although the narrator of “The Thumb” is presumably male, he is unnerved by the hypermasculine right thumb that mars the beauty of Sabrina, a woman who otherwise strikes him as an epitome of femininity. By combining the physical qualities of both sexes, Sabrina simultaneously arouses and disgusts the narrator. She becomes the object of his obsessive fascination, a woman who keenly appeals to him but whose thumb ultimately discomfits him when he abruptly halts his courtship. As Lorrie Goldensohn points out, the narrator’s “choking rage and madness” are “directed at the courtship pattern toward which Sabrina invites him” (“Body’s Roses” 75). This situation sums up Bishop’s sense of her predicament as a lesbian woman in a heteronormative environment.

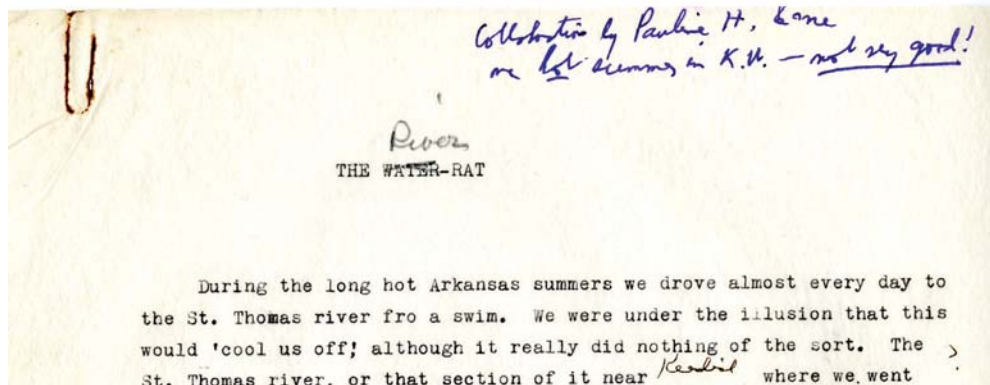
Sabrina’s thumb is that of a “brute” (*PPL* 514). Bishop calls attention to its ungainliness. The thumb is covered by several “coarse, black hairs,” which intensify its repulsiveness by making its manliness contrast the more starkly with the feminine perfection of Sabrina’s physical charms and engaging demeanor (*PPL* 515). Those hairs, like the shape and quality of the eponymous appendage, make the thumb a symbolic phallus. They provoke the kind of sexual anxiety that J. Alfred Prufrock feels when he considers the fine hairs on the arms of “the women who come and go / Talking of Michelangelo” (132). At the same time, the “obscene” starkness of the thumb might figure the clitoris (*PPL* 514). By noticing and not noticing Sabrina’s flawed right thumb, the narrator shows that he is obsessed with it, both seeking to avoid it and finding himself staring at it—and even dreaming of touching it (*PPL* 516). In this respect, Bishop offers a symbol of the homosexual who is unable to accept the truth of his or her same-sex desire. In Thomas Travisano’s view, “The question of gender reversal is unavoidable: one has to wonder if Bishop is not using an implicitly male narrator (neither his sex nor his name are ever actually specified) to explore her attraction to forbidden beauty” (“Emerging Genius” 46).

The ambivalence of “The Thumb” is not evident in “Penelope Gwin.” However, in “The River-Rat” and “Eula Wiggle,” two unpublished stories Bishop composed as an adult, a dim or outright negative view of marriage prevails. This view is anchored in the character-narrators of both stories, which are set in Arkansas (Pauline Hemingway, with whom Bishop collaborated on the stories, was from Piggott, Arkansas, the setting of “Eula Wiggle”). Bishop’s archive at Vassar does

not indicate a date for “Eula Wiggle,” but it does identify “The River-Rat” as having been written circa 1948. There is no evidence of who assigned this date or how, and Brett Millier does not discuss either story in her biography nor does Megan Marshall in *Elizabeth Bishop: A Miracle for Breakfast*. Nonetheless, these stories are worth considering in light of Bishop’s stated intention that she would never marry and in light of constraints on women’s freedom and independence in the middle of the twentieth century. “The River-Rat” portrays marriage as a physically damaging, sickly state, whereas “Eula Wiggle” addresses the institution in comic terms, spoofing courtship as a form of calculated self-fashioning and marriage as primarily a means of achieving upward mobility.

Both items are in Box 53 of the archive, and in a letter to an editor at *The New Yorker*, Bishop mentions stories set in Arkansas composed by herself and Pauline Hemingway (EBNY 36), suggesting that both texts were collaborations. In addition, both stories are in typescript and feature numerous emendations in ink and in pencil, indicating that Bishop-Hemingway revised the story in several stages. Since insertions in ink are crossed out and replaced with emendations in pencil, the pencil markings seem to represent a later stage of revision.⁴ There are also two drafts of each story. An archivist has placed the drafts inside folded sheets to label each one as the first or second. Although Bishop (and Hemingway) may well have preferred to revise further (especially as there are unfilled textual gaps in some cases), both stories have some form of conclusion and a comparatively clear logic to their plots. Unlike the drafts of some poems in the archive, which often feature alternate options for specific words without indicating a definitive preference for either, the revisions of these prose documents arguably provide more clues to readers about overall structure and particular choices regarding diction. For example, the first draft of “The River-Rat” is titled “The Water- (River) Rat,” with “River” inserted in parentheses as a potential substitute for “Water.” The second draft is simply titled “The River-Rat,” with “Water” crossed out in pencil. Seeing these material features of the archival documents gives one a sense of the process of composition and raises questions about the nature of Bishop’s collaboration with Hemingway.

Both typescripts are on onionskin paper and feature rust marks from paper clips at the upper left-hand corner. Both are paginated. Some of the typeface is relatively faded, but all of the text is comparatively legible, even when typed alterations have been made. Some of the sheets are folded in the corners and marked by minor stains. Revisions, as I have mentioned, are indicated in both ink and pencil. In every case except one, the emendations are legible or discernible because of the textual context. There are some blanks in the typescript of “Eula Wiggle” without any handwritten insertions. In at least one other blank appearing in “The River-Rat,” an indecipherable word has been inserted by hand.



Part of the first page of the second draft of Bishop's unpublished short story "The River-Rat"

At the top of "The River-Rat," there is an inscription in purple ink that reads, "Collaboration by Pauline H. and me one hot summer in K.W.—not very good!" Nevertheless, the handwriting for the revisions appears to be by the same person and looks similar to the handwriting of Bishop's notebooks, letters, and draft poems. Such manuscript annotations and emendations indicate that although the collaboration was playful and Bishop felt some doubts as to the quality of at least one of them, she also decided they were worth pursuing to the extent of typing and revising them. Another piece of evidence supports the idea that Bishop considered the stories worth her time and energy. She tested the waters regarding the publication of "The River-Rat." On April 26, 1948, she wrote William Maxwell the following letter:

My friend, Mrs. Pauline Hemingway, and I have been amusing ourselves in our spare time here by collaborating on some little stories. They mostly grew out of anecdotes she has told me about her life in Arkansas twenty or thirty years ago. We have been doing it more or less for fun but I have decided to send one ["The River-Rat"] on to you to see if you think there is any possibility of making New Yorker material out of it. We have a couple more and ideas for several more—one trouble is that some of the tales just don't seem credible, although they are perfectly true.

I should be grateful if you could give me an opinion. (EBNY 35-36)

No reply from Maxwell seems to have survived, but perhaps he discouraged Bishop from pursuing the material any further, given that she never published either story. Joelle Biele does not state whether a typescript of "The River-Rat" appears in *The New Yorker* files along with a copy of the letter she reproduces in her edition of Bishop's *New Yorker* correspondence, but she points out in a footnote that "Bishop

submitted the story under the name ‘Katherine Burns’” (36). The content of Bishop’s letter to Maxwell accords with the handwritten note at the top of a typescript copy of the story in the Vassar archives identifying Pauline Hemingway as the coauthor. In the other story, the name of the family for whom the eponymous Eula Wiggle works is “Bishway.” The character-narrator of the story is a member of this family, and the moniker seems to be a comical portmanteau of Bishop and Hemingway’s surnames. The name may also play on *bushwa* (“bunkum, hooley”).

Let me provide a brief summary of the story lines for each piece, beginning with “The River-Rat.” The protagonist is Linnie May Blackshire, a fourteen-year-old female Huckleberry Finn (she lives in a shack with her father and belongs to a clan of “river people”). The story is told by a character-narrator whose younger eleven- or twelve-year-old sister, Winnie Burns, befriends and admires Linnie. (Given her doubts about fictional credibility in the letter to Maxwell, Bishop may have wanted to intensify the story’s verisimilitude by giving the narrator the same surname as Bishop’s *nom de plume*, implying that it was a personal memoir.) The story begins when the unnamed narrator joins other prepubescent and adolescent boys and girls for a picnic lunch and swimming. The narrator carefully explains that the boys are able to cross the river easily, but many of the girls ask a male to spot them. The narrator refers to these boys as “boosters.” When the narrator encounters some trouble, she shouts to her booster, Robert, “You go and get help. You can make it by yourself” (VC 53.4, p. 2). After Robert balks, she repeats the command and he finally complies (VC 53.4, p. 2).⁵ Then she remarks, “It was a relief to be going to death alone anyway. The water was a very pleasant temperature, very soft and soothing” (VC 53.4, p. 2). At this point in the story the narrator seems to have become “a believer in total immersion” like the speaker of “At the Fishhouses” (PPL 51). As she struggles to stay above water, she decides that life isn’t worth the effort and succumbs to the current, sinking and rising several times. On one of her descents, she is suddenly yanked to the surface and saved. The narrator identifies her savior as “the already slightly legendary Linnie May Blackshire,” informing the reader that this is her first close encounter with the legend and that she admires her (VC 53.4, p. 2). Linnie May speaks in a matter-of-fact dialect and tells the narrator, “You hadn’t order try that with the river rising” (VC 53.4, p. 2).

Winnie and the narrator decide to thank Linnie May for her valor by inviting her on an outing with them in “Uncle Philp’s [sic]” attractive green canoe, which, like Linnie May, is characterized as “legendary” (VC 53.4, p. 4). The canoe has a cosmopolitan provenance, coming from Germany and having been used on trips in Mexico. The narrator emphasizes the enviable beauty and glamor of the canoe, portraying it as a kind of *object d’art* and sign of her family’s social status. She reports that the girls embark on several outings. Incidentally, the boat is called

Merde Alors, a name which Linnie May finds “poetic” and repeats aloud for the pleasure of it, as charmed by the sound of the phrase as though it were “Juanita” or “Ramona” (VC 53.4, p. 4; underlining in original). In the course of one canoe trip, Linnie May displays her keen visual acuity (just as she had done in saving the narrator). She shushes the sisters on the canoe when she notices movement on the shore. She quickly picks up her rifle and shoots into the bush on the bank, deftly bagging a squirrel. Her good marksmanship is the result of an almost preternatural eyesight, which Winnie admires and obviously wants to emulate. After killing the squirrel, Linnie May informs the sisters that she will retrieve it on the return journey and serve it up for supper to her father (VC 53.4, p. 4).

Linnie May’s powers of perception and communion with her landscape are similarly on display in another important scene. She notices a snake swimming across the river and concludes that it must be getting late. When the sisters ask her how she knows this, she explains that the snake swims across the river every day at 5 o’clock, which means she must return home because it is “Time to fix supper” for her father and herself. The narrator takes pains to underscore Linnie May’s independence and vigor. It is clear that she is a paragon of American self-reliance and that both sisters admire her because of this. “Although her father was a religious man and inclined to be strict about such things as dancing,” we are told, “Linnie May managed their house to suit herself, shot squirrels, fished and swam whenever she felt like it. It was her belle epoque” (VC 53.4, p. 5; underlining in original). Both sisters regard Linnie May’s freedom as “ideal” (VC 53.4, p. 3), and on their outings they form a positive female community together.

The pastoral summer comes to an end when Winnie goes off to boarding school and Linnie May and one of her friends hire themselves “out as maids-of-all-work” (VC 53.4, p. 6). The turning point in the story happens when Linnie May comes back home and announces her plans to marry. Her groom is a kind of twin; he is a “long, thin, sharp-eyed river-type, and . . . a good squirrel shot” (VC 53.4, p. 6). In the first days of their marriage, they prove to be a handsome and distinctive couple instead of “humdrum like the people in town” (VC 53.4, p. 6). They even seem a bit like E. E. Cummings’s heroic outsiders in “anyone lived in a pretty how town” (1940). But two summers later when Winnie is hailed by an unrecognizable figure in the post office, the person turns out to be Linnie May with a squalid child by her side and another one on the way. The narrator explains that “both the child and the woman looked pale and unhealthy; the woman’s hair was stringy, and when she smiled, she revealed several missing teeth” (VC 53.4, p. 6). In the final paragraph, “Katherine Burns” foreshortens the picture of Linnie May’s current state and ends

her tale abruptly, noting the change in her demeanor from “cheerful” to “whining” and her nostalgia for the “good times” they shared. She talks about those times as if they happened in the distant past instead of within recent memory (VC 53.4, p. 6).

To a degree, Linnie May’s fate parallels that of Bishop’s childhood friend Judy Flynn, whom she describes in an unpublished letter of February 1947 to her therapist, Dr. Ruth Foster. The date of the letter and the “circa 1948” on the typescript of “The River-Rat” suggest that Bishop may have written both within a comparatively short span of time. If so, Bishop’s attitudes toward Flynn may be reflected in her story. In any case, Bishop’s remarks in the archival letter reveal a frankness about lesbian experience and an attitude toward it that resists the prevailing medical discourse characterizing homosexuality as neurotic “maladjustment” (Vider 703). The conflict between Bishop’s expressed view of same-sex love and the prevailing one exemplifies the idea that the archive can sometimes give voice to the experience of oppressed people and provide a fuller, more complex understanding of the past.⁶ As Kenneth E. Foote points out, “Any view of the past conserved by the archival record can be placed, profitably, in the context of the representations maintained by other institutions” (380). In this case, the professional psychiatric community is a relevant institution to consider, since it codified homosexuality as a “sociopathic personality disturbance” in the first *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1952 (Marshall, *Elizabeth Bishop* 107).

Comparing Bishop’s letter to Foster with the heteronormative view of sexuality promulgated by such medical discourse produces a dissonant record of the meaning of same-sex relations, revealing the moral bankruptcy of medical taxonomies that seek to master and control instead of heal. As Adrienne Rich observes, “Heterosexuality has been both forcibly and subliminally imposed on women. Yet everywhere women have resisted it” (*Blood* 57). In her letter, Bishop remembers her love for Judy Flynn, “one of the most beautiful adolescent girls” she had known. A fragment of an erotic lyric about Judy in the archive shows just how struck Bishop was with Judy’s beauty. At the top of the notebook page, underneath the title “Judy,” Bishop writes the line “-At school we sat in rows,” which is followed by blanks left for more lines. Bishop then tries out some possible lines that might be placed somewhere in the poem and carries on with lines set in a stanza that seem to complete the poem:

I still am proud
that then I stared so hard
upon the back of Beauty’s neck.
I’d know it in a crowd. (VC 73.2)

From this brief lyric, written in a notebook dated 1934-37, one can see that Bishop tries to capture the experience of sitting in a row in Walnut Hill behind her beautiful friend Judy, staring at her beautiful neck.⁷ Judy returned her feelings and the two girls were talked about, but the principal, Miss Farwell, dismissed the rumors as empty gossip and even treated the girls to drives and picnics. Bishop explains to Foster that “Miss Farwell was wrong in a way but I think her attitude was quite right” (VC 118.33). Bishop cherished one particular visit from Judy while at camp: “I remember sleeping with her during a wild summer storm at some little inn on the Cape & being very happy” (VC 118.33). She also remembered Judy’s mother commenting that Judy seemed to love Bishop more than her fiancé. Finally, Bishop recalls seeing Judy years later in New York after she had married and had children. Bishop found that “she had become such a bore poor dear - very overtalkative and not nearly as beautiful though still quite handsome” (VC 118.33).

Despite the pleasure Bishop reveals when remembering her adolescent friend, she is somewhat condescending when she describes her as a married woman. Although the adult woman is still handsome, Bishop finds her less enchanting than she was when young. In “The River-Rat,” Linnie May’s transformation happens faster and is more shocking than Judy Flynn’s decline, but the changes in both women are negative. Although Bishop mentions in letters that she enjoyed being around young babies, in both the story and the letter to Foster, she is quite frank about her distaste for the physical tolls that motherhood (and not just marriage) can take on women. On this score, Bishop might have savored Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s epigram in “The Commonplace”: “It’s very queer / The dreadful trials women have to carry; / But you can’t always help it when you marry” (5).

Bishop’s commentary on Miss Farwell’s behavior and attitude regarding the crush between the young Bishop and Flynn also reflects the poet’s clear resistance to the idea that love between two people of the same sex is pathological. Her confident assertion of the legitimacy and value of her youthful romance exemplifies the idea that “the archive is a space where queer subjects put themselves together as historical subjects” (Marshall et al. 2). Bishop’s epistolary remark should be considered as an important private counterpoint to her famous public reticence about such matters.

In “Eula Wiggle,” Bishop tells a more rollicking but also more sardonic story about courtship and marriage. The tale shares something of the comedy of Flannery O’Connor. Like “The River-Rat,” Bishop tells this story via a character-narrator. She also triangulates the story’s action and characterization around the narrator, the narrator’s younger sister, and the title character in a way reminiscent of “The River-Rat,” so that even though the narrator is a witness to the action, she is also at a significant remove from the protagonist and the events she describes. Eula and Linnie

May both speak in an obviously marked dialect that differentiates them from the narrator in each story. The assumed name Bishop used when she showed “The River-Rat” to Maxwell compounds this pattern of social differentiation, because the character-narrator’s surname is the same as that of the pseudonymous author.

The problem of “Eula Wiggle” is that the main character wants to get married but believes she must obtain a divorce first. This situation is the basis for comedy, but it is also a means for Bishop to express her scorn for marriage and the rituals of courtship that can repress and infantilize women. Eula works as a cook in the Bishway household. When her employer Mr. Bishway learns that Eula’s marriage to an out-of-town engineer is bogus, Eula is slow to comprehend. She seems impervious to enlightenment on this score. Indeed, her unflappable optimism suggests that she remains constitutionally gullible in the wake of her sham wedding. Her behavior throughout the story frequently derives from an excessive readiness to conform to social mores concerning sex and marriage because she thinks they benefit her, but the ironic perspective of Bishop’s character-narrator links Eula’s foolishness with her eagerness to marry.

Bishop offers Eula Wiggle as a comic caricature to satirize marriage as a social institution and question the social expectations associated with it. Once Eula finally accepts the fact that she was never legitimately married to the engineer, for example, she is quick to resume her quest for a husband, and soon she is conspiring with Ginnie, the narrator’s eleven-year-old younger sister,⁸ to compose letters responding to one Mr. Filbert, an Oklahoma farmer who has posted a want ad for a wife in the newspaper. In the process, she never gives a thought to her previous romantic debacle. In fact, Eula proves herself quite capable of manufacturing half-truths about herself to entice Mr. Filbert, and she succeeds in tying the knot with him.

Although Eula is the butt of the narrator’s comic irony throughout the story, she nevertheless gets her man in the end, and her sunny disposition as a married woman remains as hardy and unexamined as ever. Eula and Linnie May are alike in terms of their complacency as married women, but marriage doesn’t seem to exact the kind of physical toll on Eula that it does on Linnie May. In Eula’s case, Bishop seems to be suggesting that marriage is only viable for the comparatively witless, something she suggests in a remark she once recorded in a notebook: “Sometimes it seems—this is probably profoundly untrue but anyway—sometimes it seems—as though only intelligent people are stupid enough to fall in love, & only stupid people are intelligent enough to let themselves be loved” (qtd. in Millier, *Elizabeth Bishop* 246). With apologies to Wallace Stevens, if we doctor the following lines from “The Sense of the Sleight-of-Hand-Man,” it is possible to read them as an apt description of Bishop’s portrait of marriage in “Eula Wiggle”: “It may be the

ignorant [wo]man, alone, / Has any chance to mate h[er] life with life / That is the sensual, pearly spouse . . ." (205). In Bishop's storytelling, marriage is suitable to a rube like Eula Wiggle but not to a sophisticate like Penelope Gwin.

Like Gwin, however, the narrators of "Eula Wiggle" and "The River-Rat" do not portray marriage in a favorable light. While Bishop cherished her long partnership with Lota de Macedo Soares, she adopts a more distant and jaundiced view of heterosexual marriage in these prose stories, all of which appear to precede that relationship. Although Eula is the object of the narrator's comic scorn, she succeeds in achieving fulfillment. If she is a naive or unintelligent hayseed whose emotional life is on the same plane as the narrator's younger sister, Ginnie, Eula is also happily married and rises in class by the end of the story. This achievement is rendered with so much irony as to be a parody of the comic plot paradigm that culminates in marriage, as in many of Shakespeare's comedies. By suggesting that a foolish woman is an ideal candidate for marriage, the narrator signals her disillusionment with matrimony as a bourgeois and patriarchal institution. By pairing Eula with Ginnie in Eula's scheme to land a husband, the story reflects on the way romantic ideology outfits girls for marriage, potentially warping them in the process. As their collaboration on the composition of the personal ad suggests, Ginnie presumably wants to grow up to share Eula's fate as a happy bride whose marriage raises her station in life. For Ginnie as much as for Eula, romance is "the great female adventure, duty, and fulfillment" (Rich, *Blood* 59). The narrator, by contrast, renders Eula's fatuousness for comic effects. Through the insider/outsider stance of a character-narrator, Bishop casts a cold eye on marriage. As the plot of "The River-Rat" shows, moreover, marriage can turn out to be a destructive enterprise for an intelligent and independent woman.

If the attitudes toward marriage range from desire and disgust to ironic amusement and tragic bafflement in "The Thumb" (1930), "Eula Wiggle," and "The River-Rat" (both ca. 1948), Bishop seems to offer a gentler form of comic satire in her late poem, "Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle" (ca. 1978). Given that the poem seems to have reached its final configuration much later than the stories did,⁹ Bishop's view of matrimony may have been tempered by her years with Macedo Soares, who provided Bishop with "the affectionate protection of a home" (Bell 34). In a 1961 letter to the recently remarried Pearl Kazin Bell, Bishop even revels in marriage and domestic life¹⁰:

[I] have had "conjunctivitis" for the first time in my life. My eyes felt so horrible and I couldn't read or type for a few days and I kept feeling if only I could cry I'd be all right. So finally I sat down and read *Little Women* for about two hours and wept a great deal, as I always do at sentimentality, and my eyes felt much better. This is just to say that since then, yesterday, I have been in a golden haze of matrimony,

“womanhood,” death by—what on earth is it Beth dies of? *Little Women*, plus having a baby in the house, convinces me that probably matrimony, womanhood, babyhood, and all of it are Best. The baby particularly . . . (OA 393; ellipses in original)

By portraying the sentimentality of a well-known nineteenth-century female author as a guilty but dependable pleasure, Bishop can share her indulgence in a funny but sympathetic way with her fellow professional woman friend. Famously unsentimental in her poems, Bishop nonetheless savors the “golden haze of matrimony” in her weakened state, lapping up the convivial comforts of domesticity as the cure for her illness. With this dose of acceptable emotion, Bishop presumably recovered enough to see straight and polish off her letter. Bishop’s little lampoon depicts marriage and family life with an off-kilter, comically rosy glow, but it also expresses a measure of real tenderness. Similarly, but more significant, Bishop mentions the anniversary of her relationship with Macedo Soares in a letter she wrote to the musicians Arthur Gold and Robert Fizdale. She closes her letter to the gay couple with the following postscript: “That gold ring I usually wear says inside (or did I show you?) ‘Lota—20-12-51.’ Twenty years ago was the day I told Lota I’d stay in Brazil & she had [the ring] made for my birthday the next February. —I think I miss her more in New York than any place. She liked it so much & had such good times here—and with you” (OA 551).

“Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle” shares the air of amusement of the letter to Pearl Bell, without its reference to sentimentality. Bishop’s portrait of the couple calls attention to the miscommunication that often characterizes if not defines the marital state, but (like the epistolary picture of domestic bliss) it nonetheless allows for a certain wistfulness in its outlook. The poem recounts a story of missed connections: the husband plans to meet his wife at an inn called the Swan with Two Necks, but the rendezvous goes awry. Mr. Carlyle is working on a book, so his wife is trying to protect his peace and quiet, but the contretemps at the inn annoys her. Bishop’s freakish figure of the double-headed swan deftly expresses the conundrum that love and companionship inevitably entail situations of conflict. Bishop’s image (“One flesh and two heads”) comically depicts marital unity as an unnatural monstrosity (*EAP* 180).

Siobhan Phillips offers a sophisticated reading of this poem by putting it in the context of Bishop’s epistolary practice. Bishop’s “swan with two necks,” she writes,

uses its source to suggest a literary-humanistic possibility, recognizing the white of the page as an almost erotic field of affection and resistance, in which the exchange of words can turn into a dialogue of kisses and pecks and in which those kisses and pecks can turn into each other. The “Swan” of “Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle” honors the

genre in which this poem began, evincing Bishop's appreciation for writing as an ethical relationship rather than subjective expression or objective account. ("Elizabeth Bishop" 346)

Phillips's approach is complex and rich. At the same time, it seems important that the letter on which Bishop bases this poem was addressed not to Thomas Carlyle but to Jane Carlyle's aunt (Carlyle 163-65). While the poem focuses on the doings of both Mr. and Mrs. Carlyle, it portrays marriage as a kind of comedy of errors. There is a double edge to the poem, for it depicts marriage as both a form of union and of "seething" conflict (which, after all, was a factor in Bishop's "marriage" to Macedo Soares). Swans may be an ideal metaphor for the faithful love that unites a couple over the course of a lifetime, but Bishop certainly portrays marriage as a form of the grotesque in the paradoxical image of "One flesh and two heads." Phillips emphasizes the way "pecks" can become kinds of kisses, which is surely apt, but Bishop's syntax ("or") also calls attention to the more aggressive meaning of *pecks*, and this more negative sense aligns well with other diction in the poem such as "fuss" and "vex." Mrs. Carlyle's part in her marriage is not without its costs, for she must "save" herself fuss through ingenuity and circumscribe her activity to avoid bothering her husband.¹¹

Bishop expresses her amusement with Mrs. Carlyle's complaints in a letter she wrote to Howard Moss in 1970, admitting in the course of her account of "woeful trials" that "I do sound just like Mrs. Carlyle" (*EBNY* 311).¹² She rounds out the letter to Moss by explaining that she "re-read" Mrs. Carlyle's letters "to let her do my complaining for me" (*EBNY* 313). One detects in Bishop's amusement a kind of affection for Mrs. Carlyle's crankiness as well as a recognition that marriage sometimes drives a wife to "fight to be affectionate" (Moore, *New Collected Poems* 66). Bishop confesses in a letter to Frani Blough Muser that she "loathe[d]" Mr. Carlyle but "like[d] his letters" (*OA* 514). Like the poem, this remark bespeaks a realistic or pragmatic attitude toward marriage. By the time Bishop reached the later stages of the poem's revision, she had become well acquainted with both the charms and challenges of marriage, or at least of the long-term same-sex relationships that in our own time might have become legal marriages.

NOTES

1. Hugh McIntosh reads the epistolary exchanges between Lowell and Bishop as a figurative or queered form of marriage (231). According to him the poets shared "a fantasy of heterodomesticity that is typical of realist fiction" (238). By imitating and echoing each other in letters and poems, they expressed their mutual attraction. Moreover, their relationship "brought together

- a conventional logic of marriage, seeing oneself with the other, and a more subversive cross-gendering, identifying oneself as the other” (238).
2. For a nuanced treatment of Bishop’s negotiation of this situation, see Pollak 238-40.
 3. By contrast, when she wrote love poems, they were about lesbian desire and same-sex love, not heterosexual marriage. The love poetry she published during her lifetime was subtle and coded, but she did choose to publish it. In much of her posthumously published work, however, she was more forthright about her love of other women.
 4. Regarding the genesis of a text, Wim Van Mierlo observes that “[p]en and paper are not neutral in the writing; they can stimulate or inhibit, and thus determine both the rhythm of composition and the shape of what is being written” (33).
 5. Perhaps the booster’s name echoes that of Robert Seaver, the man who proposed to Bishop and committed suicide after she rejected his proposal. The following passage may hint at a memory of Seaver’s death: “Maybe I’d better take your hand’ gasped my booster, seizing it and trying to steer us both upstream. But giving up one hand destroyed my coordination completely and we both slid faster down the river. I was dragging my helper with me and he, - ‘the only son of his mother and she a widow’, raced through my head” (VC 53.4, p. 2). In any case, it is significant that a female, not a male, saves the narrator and bonds with her emotionally afterward.
 6. At the same time, it is worth bearing in mind that the scholarly review of private documents not intended for publication is a delicate matter, particularly in the case of so famously private a poet as Bishop. In historian Carolyn Steedman’s words, the scholar “who goes to the Archive must always be an unintended reader, will always read that which was never intended for his or her eyes” (73). In effect, the scholar in the archive “always reads . . . [a] purloined letter” (73).
 7. Megan Marshall mangles her transcription of the last line of the poem as “upon this best of Beauty,” rendering it unintelligible (*Elizabeth Bishop* 121). This misquotation (and many others throughout critical work on Bishop) exemplifies the continuing problem of relying on secondary sources rather than primary ones when discussing Bishop’s archive.
 8. Pauline Hemingway’s sister, with whom Bishop was also acquainted, was named Virginia (“Jinny”) Pfeiffer.
 9. Bishop’s 1948 letter to William Maxwell, together with the inscription “ca. 1948” at the top of the “The River-Rat” typescript, provides an approximate date of composition for that story and perhaps also “Eula Wiggle.” In a letter of July 9, 1978, to Frank Bidart, Bishop refers to the poem as “a very slight affair” that she “started long ago” but is now “almost done” (OA 625).
 10. In an earlier, unpublished letter, Bishop congratulates her friend on her marriage to Daniel Bell, pointing out in a marginal comment that “Sino” is Portuguese for bell (VC 24.11, p. 1). Bishop closes with a playful postscript playing on her friend’s new surname, quoting from Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Bells” (“Hear the mellow wedding bells - / Golden bells!”) (VC 24.11, p. 3).
 11. Mrs. Carlyle’s pragmatism may be the antithesis of Eula Wiggle’s sentimentality. Bishop might have agreed with Oscar Wilde that “A sentimentalist is simply one who wants to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it. . . . As soon as you have to pay for an emotion you will know its quality, and be the better for such knowledge” (639). In Bishop’s poem, Mrs. Carlyle may not be altogether better for her emotional knowledge, but she surely seems to pay for it.
 12. In a less comical remark two years later, Bishop wrote to Bidart that she had recently attended “the first wedding of my life” and “found it pretty depressing” (OA 557).