

“Sporty” Girls and “Artistic” Boys: Friendship, Illicit Sex, and the British “Companionship” Advertisement, 1913–1928

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ON SEPTEMBER 1, 1920, Sir Basil Thomson, commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, received a note warning him of a grave threat to the morals of the British nation. The letter was from R. A. Bennett, editor of the weekly newspaper *Truth* and a prominent campaigner against white slavery.¹ Bennett enclosed a small pamphlet, available from newsagents in plain cover for the price of eight pence. A cursory glance at its pages, he announced, would allow the commissioner to judge its highly immoral character.

The offending paper was a small, monthly publication, usually no more than ten pages long, called the *Link*. Created in 1915 by the editor and comic novelist Alfred Barrett and initially appearing under the title *Cupid's Messenger*, its editorial page proudly declared it to be “the only monthly practically devoted to love interests.”² Each issue included an editorial section and three sections of advertising, from “Ladies,” “Soldiers and Sailors,” and “Civilians” (men) who were seeking “companions,” “friends,” or “pen pals.” In addition to the advertisements, which were free, the paper offered a service that would provide up to twelve introductions to other “suitable” subscribers for a small fee.³ To its supporters, the *Link* was an innocent and socially valuable medium that facilitated the forma-

¹Bennett had provided an introductory note to an anti-white slavery book by W. N. Willis, *Western Men with Eastern Morals* (London, 1913), which followed a series of articles in *Truth* about the practice of “concubinage” among white colonials in Burma. I would like to thank Lucy Bland, Penny Tinkler, the referees of this journal, and the members of the History Department at the University of Manchester for constructive commentary on this article.

²*Cupid's Messenger* (June 1915): masthead.

³*Cupid's Messenger* (January 1916): 2.

tion of new friendships. To critics like Bennett, it promoted moral decay and prostitution. In spite of the *Link's* apparent insignificance and small circulation, its history was to become a symbol of postwar conflict over the apparently rising tide of sexual immorality.

The "lonely hearts" advertisements featured in the *Link* and similar publications enjoyed their greatest popularity in Britain between about 1913 and the mid-1920s. These "friendship" or "companionship" ads emerged as a form distinct from "matrimonial" ads and were helped by wartime conditions to become a semilegitimate form of courtship and self-promotion. During the war, journals and newspapers began to print requests for "companionship" from men and women, often alongside pleas for correspondence from "lonely soldiers," sailors, and airmen.

Lonely hearts advertisements and correspondence clubs were also the ideal anonymous means for homosexual men to arrange social contacts. But it was predominantly middle-class, young, metropolitan women who were assumed to be the principal constituency for these media. The vogue for these advertisements enabled women to explore the widening arena of possibilities for romantic encounters that lay between the traditional Edwardian locations of female sexuality: prostitution and marriage. In their advertisements such women were able to define themselves as "sporty," "bohemian," and "unconventional" yet "refined" and "educated" and hence to give hints of sexual availability while at the same time retaining an aura of respectability. It was this fundamental ambiguity that made the companionship advertisement and the correspondence club so successful. Both forms allowed the tentative exploration of new kinds of association with the opposite sex in which the object of the parties was formally acknowledged as "non-matrimonial." The rise of the companionship advertisement and the correspondence club therefore signaled a fundamental shift in the nature of intimate relations.

The story of the *Link* and other publications like it reveals the subtle shifts in the nature of courtship that occurred in Great Britain in the years surrounding World War I. Despite the alarms sounded by purity reformers like Bennett, new ideas about "companionship" between the sexes had begun to inform social practices. Some of these changes became more obvious during the course of the war. By the 1920s, the well-publicized trial of the *Link* and a series of journalistic exposés brought these conflicts over the changing nature of courtship into the open.

THE *LINK*: ITS ENEMIES AND ITS FRIENDS

For *Truth's* crusading editor, R. A. Bennett, who had carefully highlighted the most flagrant passages in the *Link* with a green pencil so as to leave the police in no doubt, the paper was a clear moral danger. The section devoted to the ladies was, Bennett wrote, "frank enough," but its status

"was a mere question of ethics" compared to "the section devoted to the male sex, where the advertisers seem to be running up against the criminal law." Specifically, some male advertisers appeared to be engaged in the pursuit of decidedly "unnatural" liaisons. These advertisements, including one in particular from an "Oxonian . . . 26" who described himself as a "brilliant, courteous, humorous, poet, future novelist, in love with beauty despite cosmic insignificance, [and] masculine,"⁴ seemed to Bennett to "speak for themselves as plainly as such an advertisement could." He claimed that his action was prompted by firm evidence from a woman friend whose son had been a patron of the *Link*. Through this medium the youth had made, Bennett said, "various acquaintances of which his mother strongly disapproves."⁵

Other men understood the *Link* in similar terms. When a fifty-seven-year-old man named Walter Birks was arrested in Carlisle on a charge of fraud, he was found to be carrying love letters from one William Ernest Smyth, a twenty-two-year-old clerk living in Belfast. When a police officer visited Smyth's rooms he discovered a lengthy and explicit correspondence between the two men and "hundreds" of other letters from "various people."⁶ It was soon revealed that the correspondence between Smyth and Birks and their subsequent love affair had been initially arranged via the pages of the *Link*. Some of Smyth's letters were from another clerk, Geoffrey Smith, who lived in Enfield, near London. All three men were arrested, along with the *Link*'s publisher, Alfred Barrett, and charged together with fifteen separate counts of conspiring to corrupt public morals "by introducing men to women for fornication and by introducing men to men for unnatural and grossly indecent practices."⁷ Barrett and the others were also charged with aiding and abetting the commission of gross indecency and conspiring to enable the commission of such acts with others unknown.⁸

At the trial in June 1921 the evidence against the *Link* appeared to be pretty damning. Prosecuting counsel's description of the paper as an "advertising pimp" seemed to be confirmed by the defendants' correspondence. These communications seemed to place them in a homosexual tradition that stretched back at least as far as Oscar Wilde. Smyth's self-description was

⁴*Link* (September 1920): 9. The word "masculine" was underlined heavily by either Bennett or the police. Other ads featured men who were "in love with beauty." One was an "idealist" who was also "artistic, [and a] firm believer in [Edward] Carpenter's books." "Iolaus . . . 24" was "intensely musical," of a "peculiar temperament," and had been "looking for many years for [a] tall, manly Hercules" (*Link* [September 1920]: 14).

⁵R. A. Bennett to Sir Basil Thomson, September 1, 1920, Public Record Office Kew (hereafter PRO), MEPO 3/283.

⁶*Daily Express*, June 8, 1921.

⁷CID Report, June 14, 1921, PRO MEPO 3/283.

⁸*Ibid.*

certainly that of a Wildean archetype.⁹ He was, he wrote to Birks, “very fond of artistic surroundings, beautiful colours in furniture and curtains and softly shaded lamps and all those beautiful things which appeal to the refined tastes of an artistic mind,” namely, “[f]lowers, perfume, colour and beautiful scenery.” If that were not enough encouragement, his literary tastes also signaled his interest, encompassing as they did most of the authors in the homosexual canon: Edward Carpenter, Walt Whitman, Maeterlinck, Baudelaire, and Rupert Brooke. There was, he wrote, “nothing that I could not give to a friend who loved me.” He longed to bestow his love “in the most intimate way that you could desire.”¹⁰

Such letters provided the police with the substance of their case against the four men. But for the public who did not learn their more explicit contents, the invocation of Wilde’s reputation alone was enough to pre-judge the defendants. As the *Daily Express* noted knowingly, “‘Dorian Gray’ was mentioned in several letters.” Mr. Justice Darling remarked to the jury that the infamous story had been material at Wilde’s trial in 1895, noting that “the author Oscar Wilde had been cross-examined about [it].” In addition, the prosecution informed the court that the *Link* “contained hundreds of advertisements from men who described themselves as ‘artistic and musical.’”

The prosecution alleged that Smyth told the police on being arrested that his principal means for making contact with other “musical” men was through the medium of the *Link*. His aim in writing and answering advertisements, he said, was “to obtain information on homosexual matters in a decent way, as he had not all the information he desired from books at his command.”¹¹ That was enough evidence for the prosecution to adumbrate a widespread network of depravity. The “great object of these sexual perverts,” prosecuting counsel concluded, “seemed to be to find the names and addresses of persons like themselves.” The result was that Barrett was “breeding a social pestilence” by means of his journal.¹²

Although the homosexual advertisements provided the substance of the charges (fourteen out of fifteen counts) against the *Link*’s publisher, the morality of the heterosexual notices was also questioned. However, the meaning of these notices was not quite so easily decided. Most of the advertisements placed by women were, on the face of it, tame, to say the least. To modern eyes, it would seem that few could have had any objections to the

⁹On the Wildean basis of homosexual identity in this period, see Alan Sinfield, *The Wilde Century: Oscar Wilde, Effeminacy and the Queer Moment* (London, 1994), and *Out on Stage: Lesbian and Gay Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1999). On the long shadow thrown by Wilde, see Philip Hoare, *Wilde’s Last Stand: Decadence, Conspiracy and the First World War* (London, 1997). For the influence of Carpenter, see A. T. Fitzroy, *Despised and Rejected* (London, 1918).

¹⁰Smyth to Birks, October 21, 1920, PRO MEPO 3/283.

¹¹CID Report, June 14, 1921, PRO MEPO 3/283.

¹²*News of the World*, May 8, 1921.

"Gentlewoman (London, S.W.), young widow, very good standing . . . [who] would like to meet cultured man, 30–40." Less suggestive still was the demure insertion from the "Catholic lady (Abroad)" who "would appreciate letters from gentlemen anywhere in England or Rhine Army."¹³

However, the prosecution ignored these ads in favor of notices that hinted at some kind of sexual adventure. The first of these incriminating announcements, "Young Grass Widow . . . wishes to meet straightforward man," seemed to suggest an adulterous quest. The second, "Lothario, London West, 30, ex officer, wants cuddlesome girls, fond river, dancing, pleasure," seemed to indicate that an army of male sexual predators had been given license by the existence of the *Link*. The *News of the World* also claimed that during a raid on the *Link* offices, the police had discovered batches of letters "clearly showing what the immoral section of the public considered the paper existed for." Many of these, it claimed, were "from women offering to sell their bodies to anyone who came along," while others suggested that its advertisers had quickly disappeared into an unnamable fate in the world of white slavery.¹⁴

The evidence was apparently stacked against them. Furthermore, Barrett and the others had the misfortune to be tried by Mr. Justice Darling, a self-appointed scourge of what he perceived as lax postwar morals.¹⁵ The letters between Smyth and Birks presented by the prosecution were, Darling proclaimed, "the most filthy he had ever heard read in a long experience" and "showed a depravity which one could hardly have believed possible." Barrett's own sexual preferences were also an indication of his guilt, since the police claimed that he was a man "who had gratified himself by a study of books and pictures relating to abominable practices."¹⁶ There could be no greater attack on the morals of the country, Darling told him, than to "establish a paper as you did for the purpose of allowing men and women to commit immorality."¹⁷ Regretting bitterly that he could not dispatch the defendants to penal servitude, Darling settled for the scarcely less onerous maximum sentence: two years imprisonment at hard labor.

While crusaders like Darling and Bennett attacked the *Link* as a moral danger and purveyor of depravity, Barrett claimed that it was an innocent medium of friendship. Barrett was an unlikely white slaver, having edited the *Christian World*, the *Family Circle*, and the women's paper *Mary Bull*. He was also a well-known comic novelist under the name R. Andom and

¹³*Link* (March 1921): 4.

¹⁴*News of the World*, May 8, 1921.

¹⁵Darling had presided over the Maud Allan libel trial, which was the high point of the Pemberton Billing affair in 1917. On this, see Hoare.

¹⁶The police stated that during a search of Barrett's home in Balham they had found about a hundred "grossly indecent" photographs (CID Report, April 18, 1921, PRO MEPO 3/283).

¹⁷*Daily Telegraph*, June 11, 1921.

a member of the National Liberal Club.¹⁸ As his barrister pointed out, Barrett was “a journalist of high standing and long experience” whose works could be unsuccessfully scoured for immorality and uncleanness. Far from being the facilitator of prostitution, the *Link* was little more than “a useful medium for effecting genuine and sincere friendships” used with a clear conscience by “servant girls, majors, colonels, lawyers, barristers and clergymen.”¹⁹

The services provided by the *Link* partly belonged in an older tradition of matrimonial advertisements. But even marriage brokers and agents, who maintained a much more respectable front than Barrett ever could, were still regarded with suspicion. As Angus MacLaren has shown, matrimonial brokers were often thought to attract the idiotic, the old, and the gullible, and it was readily assumed that the business was carried on by fraudsters and criminals.²⁰ The popular women’s weekly *Mary Bull*, which, ironically, was edited at the time by Alfred Barrett, wrote in 1913 that some matrimonial agents were “scamps who ought to be horsewhipped, failures in decent society who prey upon the hundreds of capably unmarried housewives who yearn for a home of their own.” In many cases, *Mary Bull* declared, matrimonial agents strung clients along merely to collect their fees and with no intention of ever finding them a match.²¹

The reputation of both advertisers and agents was therefore far from good, although their ultimate goals included the establishment of legitimate marriages. Barrett took a more daring stand by specifically repudiating marriage. In doing so, he explicitly stated the novelty of his enterprise. His Victorian and Edwardian predecessors in the courtship market had rarely deviated from the idea that marriage was the natural aim of their clients, a situation reflected in their advertisements and in the structure of the marriage market. Barrett, however, encouraged the idea that a succession of

¹⁸Barrett was the inventor of the comic everyman named Troddles, who, with his male friends, went through a series of *Three Men in a Boat*-style adventures spanning the period 1907 to 1920. These works were acclaimed by reviewers as “broad, healthy and never forced.” See, for example, *Adrift with Troddles* (London, 1913); *At School with Troddles* (London, 1911); *Out and About with Troddles* (London, 1920); *Troddles in the Trenches* (London, 1919). Barrett also wrote skits on contemporary mores and lifestyles, for example, *Neighbours of Mine* (London, 1912), a series of stories about suburban life. Barrett’s publishers, Stanley Paul, claimed sales of over 300,000 for the Troddles books. See frontispiece to R. Andom, *Neighbours of Mine*.

¹⁹*Daily Telegraph*, June 9, 1921.

²⁰Angus MacLaren, *The Trials of Masculinity: Policing Sexual Boundaries, 1870–1930* (Chicago, 1997), chap. 2.

²¹*Mary Bull*, July 5, 1913, 891. One of the biggest wartime scandals surrounded the activities of Gerald Fitzgerald, a “heartless” fraudster who in 1915 tricked women out of their savings by promising them marriage via the matrimonial columns of Manchester papers. See on this *Manchester Evening News*, September 23, 25, 1915, October 8, 1915, November 17, 1915. See also the case of the “French Bluebeard,” Henri Désire Landru,

mere "companionships" might be more appealing to his customers and more in tune with contemporary tastes than an immediate statement of marital intent.²² Accordingly, the *Link* masthead proudly announced it to be "Social–Not Matrimonial–Helpful–Clean–Straight" or represented it as "A Monthly Social Medium for Lonely People."²³ According to its editor, the purpose of the paper was not necessarily to facilitate marriage but "to provide a medium by which lonely people can escape from their loneliness, and those in want of friends can be brought in communication with other friendless beings."²⁴ Immoral relations might result, but that was no business of the *Link*. Responding to suspicions that the paper might be the agent of immorality and prostitution, Barrett argued that only evil minds would find evil in the paper. There may be "risk and danger attending the use of the 'Link,'" he warned his readers, "[b]ut whereabouts in human relations are they absent?"²⁵ Danger would only result if readers "lend ready and willing aid."²⁶

Still, critics worried that the "Gentlewoman" or respectable war widow who advertised in the *Link* was clearly putting herself in sexual peril. Even in its early days the *Link*'s apparent encouragement of heterosexual immorality had attracted the attention of the authorities. In 1916 Barrett complained that "some fool" had sent a copy to the police along with the suggestion that it ought to be suppressed as it appeared to be "the official organ of the White Slave Traffic."²⁷ He defended himself by saying that while the *Link*'s services could be abused, this was unlikely since all letters had to pass through his hands. He also claimed that he would reject any advertisements that did not appear suitable. Nevertheless, Barrett was well aware that his publication could be put to nefarious uses. In 1919 he had been threatened with legal action by one of his advertisers, a man blackmailed by a woman who claimed to have become pregnant after a sexual assignation arranged through the *Link*. In 1921 another ad, which read, "Widow, (London W), greatly interested in discipline, would like to hear

who lured women to their deaths in France using similar promises of marriage. See Dennis Bardens, *The Ladykiller: The Life of Landru, the French Bluebeard* (London, 1972).

²²Victorian marital advertisements had been just that, a statement of the intention to marry, with the implied promise of engagement as the basis of courtship. In the eighteenth century, by contrast, there appears to have been more scope for the advertisement of a number of different intentions. See, for example, the 1769 advertisement that asked "any real *gentleman*" to oblige a "lady of *character*" with £100 in return for "an advantage which cannot be mentioned in a public newspaper" (*Gazetteer*, September 19, 1769, in *Matrimonial Advertisements* [private collection of matrimonial advertising, 1745–1842], British Library, CUP 407 ff 43).

²³*Link* (November 1919); *Link* (September 1920): 1.

²⁴*Link* (September 1920): 1.

²⁵*Ibid.*

²⁶*Link* (December 1918): 1.

²⁷*Link* (November 1916): 1.

from others, both sexes,” was traced to a woman with two convictions for brothel keeping.²⁸

However, such abuse of the *Link* was rare, and the police failed to present any substantial evidence of heterosexual immorality or prostitution at the trial. Moreover, it was not the evidence of heterosexual indiscretions that brought down the *Link*, since the burden of the charges against Barrett and the others aimed primarily at prosecuting the homosexual advertisers. The notices placed by “Ladies” were not automatically assumed to be criminal. Instead, they were, as R. A. Bennett had said, to be considered as a separate “ethical” question. Nor was the companionship advertisement as a form of publication or courtship destroyed by the *Link* trial. It continued unmolested in many other locations, all the while on the edge of respectability. While the evidence of homosexual contacts arising from the *Link* was fairly plentiful, little or no such evidence was forthcoming to substantiate claims that Barrett was facilitating the prostitution of women. Apart from the two cases mentioned above, the police collected no evidence against the morality of female advertisers. In spite of appearances, the *Link* did function as a genuine medium of courtship that reflected much wider changes in the nature of “friendship” between the sexes.

According to Barrett, he had created the *Link* as an altruistic solution to the epidemic of loneliness that he observed all around him. His story was that he had “been nursing the idea while conducting papers for others of no greater importance and much less utility.” When a friend of his came back to London after twenty years’ exile spent on an Australian ranch, this man’s difficulty in meeting members of the opposite sex prompted Barrett to help him out and led to the thought that “there must be . . . thousands of such in London alone, to say nothing of the feminine portion of humanity.” The *Link* thus filled “a long-felt want.”²⁹

Barrett was not the only enterprising individual to try to catch this popular mood. Although Barrett attracted all the attention because of his arrest and trial, the true inventor of the companionship advertisement was the Irish journalist and politician T. P. O’Connor. His literary journal *T.P.’s Weekly*, founded in 1902, began to carry companionship advertisements from 1913 onward in a column entitled “Friends in Council.” This page originally featured advertisements (priced at one pence per word) from those seeking pen pals and companions of their own sex. To begin with, contacts between people of the same sex were deemed harmless, while the morality of the column was guaranteed by a ban on “inquiries for companions of the opposite sex.”³⁰ Ironically, regulations like these that sought

²⁸CID Report, May 23, 1921, May 30, 1921, PRO MEPO 3/283. Barrett’s somewhat disingenuous defense of this latter notice was that “a man has just as good a right to be interested in corporal punishment as . . . in capital punishment” (*Link* [March 1921]: 1).

²⁹*Link* (November 1919): 1.

³⁰*T.P.’s Weekly*, January 2, 1914, 26.

to prevent heterosexual immorality could facilitate the formation of other alliances via the insertion of carefully coded notices. For instance, the first column in 1914 carried the announcement that a student of Whitman and Carpenter who styled himself "Calamus" after Whitman's homoerotic verse was "desirous of getting in touch with anyone living in district [Sheffield] similarly interested."³¹ As we have seen, such pronouncements were later regarded as blatantly incriminating.

Homosexual contacts through this medium seem to have continued with impunity. By 1915 the moral regulations governing advertisers who sought to meet people of the opposite sex via *T.P.'s Weekly* had become equally liberal. Some safeguards were maintained, however. The ban on contacting people of the opposite sex was dropped, and such companionships could now be requested as long as the advertiser provided two references to character, one of which had to be from a clergyman. An additional condition attempted to regulate the morality of the column by banning the suggestive words "broad-minded" and "unconventional" from advertisements. Requests for photographs were also disallowed, because "if intellectual friendship is desired what matters the appearance or station of the correspondent[?]"³² O'Connor also claimed to have started the "Lonely Soldier" movement in Britain at the end of 1914 in which servicemen would advertise for correspondents, a form that was later taken up by the metropolitan press. In addition to these services, *T.P.'s Weekly* ran the Circle Correspondence Club through which subscribers (at the rate of one shilling for three months) could retain their anonymity in the early stages of a correspondence.

No prosecution was undertaken against *T.P.'s Weekly*, which contained a similar proportion of advertisements from "artistic" and "theatrical" young men as the *Link*. Correspondence clubs like the Cosmos, the Universal, the Sesame, and the Pioneer, which were advertised in the national press throughout the 1920s, went similarly unmolested. Furthermore, similar newspaper columns, correspondence clubs, and bureaus of introduction provided many of the same services. Moreover, companionship advertisements for friends of one's own sex, often specifying physical appearance, offering holiday companionships with expenses paid, and suggesting the exchange of photographs appeared in the *Daily Express* in the mid-1920s.³³ Recognizing this new spirit, at least one matrimonial agent developed a "platonic branch" for men and women unready to commit themselves to matrimony.

³¹*T.P.'s Weekly*, January 9, 1914, 124. On the homoerotic content of Whitman's poems, see Robert K. Martin, *The Homosexual Tradition in American Poetry* (Austin, TX, 1979); Gary Schmidgall, *Walt Whitman: A Gay Life* (New York, 1997).

³²*T.P.'s Weekly*, March 20, 1915, 291.

³³*Daily Express*, July 8–31, 1924. Some of these were little different from those that had convicted Barrett. For example, the "broad minded" bachelor seeking a "male chum evenings and week-ends" (*Daily Express*, July 31, 1924, 11).

In addition, both *T.P.'s Weekly* and the *Link* claimed to process a large number of advertisements, not including the subscribers to their correspondence clubs. By its own account, *T.P.'s Weekly* dealt with between five and six hundred letters a week, amounting to a maximum of 48,000 a year.³⁴ Although his circulation was only 6,000 per issue, by 1921 Barrett claimed to have processed as many as 30,000 advertisements.³⁵ As well as the ads themselves, Barrett and O'Connor both ran affiliated bureaus of introduction and correspondence clubs from their offices. These worked by providing, for a fee, a list of pen pals or introductions conforming to the characteristics specified by the subscriber. O'Connor's club monitored the early stages of such correspondence by offering to vet each letter. Clubs like these caught on in the later stages of the war and were advertised in the national press. By the mid-1920s, the most successful of these, the Universal Correspondence Club (UCC), claimed over 10,000 members.

Conditions created by the First World War benefited Barrett's enterprise and added to its moral ambiguity. The war contributed to the disruption of older patterns of courtship and created a footloose population of young men eager to correspond with, court, and sometimes marry young women. Catering to this "lonely soldier," either at the front or on leave, became an implicit gesture of patriotic wartime service. The *Link*, as well as *T.P.'s Weekly*, sought to capture this growing clientele.

As Susan Grayzel has shown, the French viewed correspondence with a lonely soldier as a patriotic duty rather than an encouragement to immorality. Such letters functioned in a French context as a means for women to participate in the war effort by offering their love, and implicitly their bodies, as an aid to morale.³⁶ The correspondents were known as *marraines de guerre* (godmothers of war), and they performed what was originally envisaged as a quasi-maternal role of consolation and comfort. However, for all its connotations of duty and patriotism, such advertising soon became the vehicle of "companionship" between the sexes along lines similar to that being developed in Britain.³⁷ The German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, in his *Sexual History of the Great War*, also maintained that this correspondence was inherently sexualized. For the frontline soldier immured in a dugout, "a tiny gift from home, sent by some beloved hand, would have a very definite erotic value and significance."³⁸

The situation in Britain differed in two ways. Rather than being a quasi-official effort, the organization of lonely soldier correspondence was left to

³⁴*T.P.'s Weekly*, February 27, 1915, 220.

³⁵*Daily Telegraph*, June 9, 1921.

³⁶Susan R. Grayzel, "Mothers, Marraines, and Prostitutes: Morale and Morality in First World War France," *International History Review* 19.1 (1997): 66–82; Grayzel, *Women's Identities at War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1999).

³⁷Grayzel, "Mothers, Marraines," 70–75.

³⁸Magnus Hirschfeld, *The Sexual History of the Great War* (New York, 1934), 72.

enterprising individuals like Barrett and a small group of other newspapers like the *London Evening News*. In addition, advertising for correspondence or companionship continued to thrive in the postwar world. The function of lonely soldier correspondence in Britain clearly fulfilled some of the erotic functions outlined by Grayzel and Hirschfeld in the French context and was also less clearly associated with a maternal or patriotic role. It therefore immediately assumed a more morally ambiguous status.

Two wartime novels tell the story of British "marrainage" as a harmless, even beneficial activity. S. P. B. Mais's 1916 novel, *April's Lonely Soldier*, recounts the tale of two wartime pen pals who correspond, meet, and finally fall in love, although they do not get married. April begins a correspondence in spite of her fears that her "lonely subaltern" is "likely to be one of a band of young 'bloods' whose sole object is to pull the leg of some unfortunate young girl like myself by decoying her into writing stupid nonsense which you can proclaim on the housetops."³⁹ She nevertheless decides to treat him as the ideal companion and to write to him "as if you were just that friend for whom I have been looking in vain all my life, to whom I may unburden my lonely heart."⁴⁰ Equally, in Dorothy Black's *Her Lonely Soldier* (1916), the moral ambiguity of the story is contained in the fact that the woman, Cicely, is married but nevertheless carries on what amounts to an extramarital courtship with one Captain MacIntosh. She eventually saves him from war neurosis, and they are married, her husband having conveniently died.

Although the war encouraged an implicit recognition of papers like the *Link*, other social and cultural changes also gave legitimacy to its matchmaking activities. Barrett and O'Connor were shrewd enough to realize that their principal market did not consist only of lonely soldiers. They recognized that many more people faced loneliness and anonymity in the modern city and that love and courtship were among the central problems of modern life. In addition, those who put themselves at the forefront of "modern" intellectual trends and advanced thinking were also turning their attention to the nature of courtship. This was particularly marked in socialist and eugenic thought and was echoed in certain sections of the press. Together, this new school encouraged a subtle alteration in the meaning of "friendship" between the sexes and even began to encourage the kind of nonmarital relationships fostered by the *Link*.⁴¹ In particular, these writers argued that women should be active agents in courtship and love.

³⁹S. P. B. Mais, *April's Lonely Soldier* (London, 1916), 11. See also May Aldington, *Love Letters to a Soldier* (London, 1915). The *Times Literary Supplement* praised both novels as pleasant and unremarkable reading for railway journeys (September 21, 1916, 452, August 17, 1916, 395).

⁴⁰Mais, *April's Lonely Soldier*, 11.

⁴¹On this, see Marcus Collins, *Modern Love: An Intimate History of Men and Women in Britain, 1890–2000* (London, forthcoming), chaps. 1, 2.

"FRIENDSHIP" IN PROGRESSIVE THOUGHT

The war increased the number of working women and provided a natural constituency for companionship advertisements. Furthermore, wartime casualties exacerbated an existing gender imbalance and refocused attention on the problem of the "superfluous" woman. Still, the problem of courtship was by no means confined to women. According to some commentators, men were also revolting against marriage. Subtle changes in the meaning and moral status of "friendship" reflected these changing circumstances and assisted in the emergence of the companionship ad.⁴² "Passionate friendships" and "companionships" were theorized in a new way, in particular by eugenic thinkers who hoped to promote racial health and sexual selection.

Especially among intellectuals committed to notions of free love, a new conception of friendship developed in the prewar world. Friendship on the basis of equality between the sexes began to be regarded by eugenicist and progressive writers as the necessary prelude to successful union and reproduction. Writers like H. G. Wells argued that the ignorance fostered by Victorian morals began with a basic lack of acquaintance with the opposite sex. His prewar novels, *Ann Veronica*, *Tono-Bungay*, *The Passionate Friends*, and *Love and Mr. Lewisham*, all suggest that the greatest loves are those based on a lasting friendship and an undeceived attitude to the nature of morality. Mr. Capes, the married suitor of Wells's *Ann Veronica*, announces, "We are only at the dawn of the Age of Friendship . . . when interests, I suppose, will take the place of passions." Hitherto, he continues, "you have had to love people or hate them," whereas "[n]ow, more and more, we're going to be interested in them, to be curious about them and—quite mildly—experimental with them."⁴³ Of course, Capes's attachment to friendship merely conceals his deep love for Ann Veronica, which eventually finds good eugenic expression in a happy and appropriate marriage. "Friendship," for Wells and others, was therefore a sort of intermediate stage in heterosexual relations; it was the necessary, educative prelude to more intimate forms of familiarity.

As Lucy Bland has pointed out, similar intellectual circles were beginning to entertain the idea that women's sexuality might not be passive or nonexistent.⁴⁴ The beginnings of these discussions can be glimpsed in the

⁴²On women workers, see Angela Woolcott, *On Her Their Lives Depend: Munitions Workers in the Great War* (Berkeley, 1994); Gail Braybon, *Women Workers in the First World War* (London, 1981); David Fowler, *The First Teenagers: The Lifestyle of Young Wage-earners in Interwar Britain* (London, 1995).

⁴³H. G. Wells, *Ann Veronica* (London, 1909), 195. On the emerging conception of friendship as akin to "dating," see Tierl Thompson, ed., *Dear Girl: The Diaries and Letters of Two Working Women (1897-1917)* (London, 1987), 44, 56, 68.

⁴⁴Lucy Bland, "Heterosexuality, Feminism, and the *Freewoman* Journal in Early Twentieth Century England," *Women's History Review* 4.1 (1995): 5-23. On the precursors of

debate that took place on the subject in feminist circles and in the journal the *Freewoman* in the years before the war. Yet as George Robb has noted, it was eugenicist thinkers who were most prominent among those arguing for a woman's right to control her own sexuality and to become an active agent in matters of courtship.⁴⁵ In addition, eugenicists attacked the restrictions that strict moral codes placed on sexual selection. They reasoned that in order for the best kind of unions to take place, based upon competition for mates, women must exercise some free choice.

While more celebrated writers like Marie Stopes, F. W. Stella Browne, and Dora Russell argued that women ought to reclaim a degree of sexual autonomy, they were not the only thinkers to consider the difficulties of female sexual agency. During World War I, educationalists and other progressives began to approach the problem of how to forewarn young women against sexual danger without corrupting their moral nature.⁴⁶ Others turned their attention to the restructuring of courtship that such autonomy would imply. Perhaps the most daring thinker in advocating new moral codes and relationships in the interest of racial health was the eugenicist Catherine Gasquoine Hartley.

Writing in 1913, Hartley suggested that the "transformation of thought" that was going on around her required the restructuring of notions of sexual morality. In her view, the mechanism for such a revolution was the premarital "passionate friendship." The fact that men and women were increasingly having sexual relations outside marriage had to be recognized. Moreover, the increasing barriers to marriage resulting from gender imbalances in the population and economic necessity meant that in its current form marriage could not "meet the sex needs of all people." The solution, which lay in "the extending of the opportunities of honourable love," must be faced "before we can hope for more moral conditions of life."⁴⁷ Modern, late-marrying men and women should be introduced to sex without encountering the twin perils of prostitution and illegitimacy. In addition, marriage would be safe from those unable to accept its constraints. "Coercive monogamy," she wrote in 1917, could not accommodate the needs of highly sexed individuals who were consequently bringing the institution into disrepute. She pleaded with the opponents of "sexual friendships" to consider that the "discredit which has fallen upon monogamous marriage arises

the companionship advertisement in the *Adult*, the organ of the Legitimation League, see Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: English Feminism and Sexual Morality 1885-1914* (London, 1995), 156-59.

⁴⁵George Robb, "'The Way of All Flesh': Degeneration, Eugenics, and the Gospel of Free Love," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 6.4 (1996): 589-601.

⁴⁶On this, see Lucy Bland, "'Guardians of the Race' or 'Vampires on the Nation's Health?': Female Sexuality and Its Regulation in Early Twentieth Century Britain," in Elizabeth Whitelegg et al., eds., *The Changing Experience of Women* (Oxford, 1982), 379.

⁴⁷Catherine Gasquoine Hartley, "The Sexes Again," *English Review* (September 1913): 268-83.

largely from the demoralising lives lived under its cover by those unsuited for enduring mating.”⁴⁸

Assuming that celibacy was harmful and unnatural to both sexes, she proposed instead that there should be “much wider facilities for honourable partnerships outside of permanent marriage.”⁴⁹ This would, paradoxically, make society more moral, since marriage at the moment was being “buttressed with prostitution and maintained with the help of countless secret extra-conjugal relationships.” Moreover, under present conditions, extra-marital sexual relations always entailed the sacrifice of the woman’s morals or her health. In order to provide for these new kinds of relationships, or “passionate friendships” as she called them, it should be possible for women and men to enter into “contract partnerships” outside marriage. The interests of the woman, Hartley suggested, would be guaranteed by some form of insurance to which both parties would contribute and that would also provide for any children that resulted. Such contracts would, she argued, “open up possibilities of happy partnerships to many who are suffering from enforced sexual abstinence.”⁵⁰

Hartley repeated these views for a popular audience after the war by joining battle with moralists in the pages of *Lloyd’s Sunday News*. The contract partnership, she reiterated, was suited to the “weaker women and men” who were “more selfish” and “less capable of the permanent tie.” This was no reinvention of “old immorality” but a frank recognition of reality: “Better to know ourselves as sinners than to be virtuous in falsehood.”⁵¹ Her opinions were predictably denounced by Lady Beecham, the secretary of the Marriage Defence League, who proclaimed that such arrangements would not prevent a man from having twenty, thirty, or fifty such “wives.”⁵²

In spite of such violent condemnation, the postwar recognition that sexual morals had undergone a profound transformation meant that Hartley’s views found a more receptive audience after 1918. Other progressive thinkers joined her in promoting “sex-companionship” as a new form and in advocating the sexual agency of women. The periodical *English Review*, which had aired Hartley’s original article in 1913, continued to press the case for moral change. A 1923 article by the journalist Vero Garratt argued that a “new free and easy sex-companionship” had been born out of the difficulty of matching the ages of sexual and emotional maturity with marriage. The new attitude meant that “where it is possible

⁴⁸Catherine Gasquoine Hartley, *Motherhood and the Relationship of the Sexes* (London, 1917), 226.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 227.

⁵⁰Gasquoine Hartley, “The Sexes Again,” 279.

⁵¹*Lloyd’s Sunday News*, February 22, 1920, 8. See also Catherine Gasquoine Hartley, “Marriage a Racial Duty,” *Lloyd’s Weekly News*, March 22, 1920, 8.

⁵²*Lloyd’s Sunday News*, February 29, 1920, 8.

for men and women to come together and form friendships they do so, without any regard for the committal convention that marriage must be the object in view." Both sexes were too well aware of the barriers between them to entertain "any illusions as to the character of such friendship."⁵³ Similarly, Leonard Rossiter's 1928 novel, *The Sex Age*, set out to satirize the new climate that had "swept away . . . the silly old superstition that a young man and woman must have thoughts of matrimony if they consorted equally with one another." In Garratt's view, such "sex-companionship" should be "socialised instead of ostracised."⁵⁴

At the same time as these arguments were appearing, other writers and journalists were reaching similar conclusions. Specifically, a popular mood developed that was receptive to the new ideas propagated by "advanced" thinkers. Papers like the *Link* reached a receptive audience among the increasing numbers of people who were skeptical about the benefits of early marriage, tolerant of the looser wartime and postwar moral atmosphere, and alienated by modern city life. Moreover, the economic barriers to marriage, added to the dislocations of the war, created the perception that "loneliness" was by no means confined to the "superfluous" woman.

Other changes assisted the rise of new patterns of "dating" behavior. In particular, we might see in the rise of the personal ad one response to what John Gillis has identified as the interwar "ritualisation of courtship."⁵⁵ Gillis suggests that the expansion of adolescence as a period in which children were subject to the disciplines of familial authority, along with the perceived difficulties of setting up the marital home, encouraged long courtships characterized by formalized codes of behavior. The adolescent practice of "walking out," the public thrills and indignities of the "monkey rank," and the desperate attempt to escape parental surveillance were all part of this new world of dating ritual. Similarly, the language of the advertisement, with its distillation of characteristics and desires into a pithy sentence, together with its codes and evasions, might also be seen as a "ritualized" form.

These structural changes ensured that the *Link* and its imitators became increasingly accepted. The social usefulness that some saw in the *Link* and the correspondence club derived partly from the problem of what eugenicist writer Walter Gallichan called "The Great Unmarried,"

⁵³Vero Garratt, "Youth and Marriage," *English Review* (May 1923): 473–79, 477.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 478. On the rejection of marriage by the French *femme seule*, see Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilisation without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Postwar France, 1917–1927* (Chicago, 1994), 154–65.

⁵⁵John R. Gillis, *For Better, for Worse: British Marriages from 1600 to the Present* (Oxford, 1985). On the changes in intimate relations associated with "modernity," see Anthony Giddens, *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies* (Cambridge, 1992); Niklas Luhmann, *Love as Passion: The Codification of Intimacy* (Cambridge, 1986).

whose ranks were swelled on both sides by the war.⁵⁶ Marriage not only became more difficult but also became unfashionable to the extent that, according to Edward Cecil, “young people are saying that they are not going to jump down into a pit out of which they can only scramble with a great deal of difficulty.”⁵⁷

As a result, the *Link* began to attract an increasingly favorable press. During the war, Austin Harrison wrote approvingly of the paper in the *Sunday Pictorial*, noting that the rising barriers to marriage made the publication’s existence both inevitable and desirable. Class differences were partly responsible for the fact that those outside upper-class “Society” had no “common meeting ground.”⁵⁸ The natural reticence of the British simply made this situation worse. The *Link*, he suggested, was the remedy for “this state of loneliness in which so many English men and women live.” The novelist Hubert Wales, writing in the *Sunday Pictorial*, also argued that there were very limited facilities “for getting to know each other” in what he called “Lonely London.”⁵⁹ The *Daily Chronicle* similarly wrote approvingly of “a little periodical with which possibly everyone but myself is already acquainted.”⁶⁰ Given the melancholy state of modern courtship, it was scarcely surprising that the national press tolerated and even recommended the *Link* as a suitable response to the difficulties of meeting suitable partners.

After the war, the problem of what the *Daily Mail* called the “mateless multitude” became worse than ever. Writing on this subject in the *Daily Mail* in 1920, January Mortimer claimed that “correspondence from mateless and lonely men and women still strews my desk.” Clergymen, authors, men of business, and clerks had all written to him complaining that they had no “girl friends.” This situation could not be explained solely by reference to the temperamental deficiencies of men, Mortimer argued. It was a fact that “there are many whose misfortune it is to live under conditions that practically exclude all chances of friendly association with young women.”⁶¹

In these circumstances, anything that mitigated the loneliness and isolation of both sexes was accepted and even encouraged. Any qualms about

⁵⁶On the supposed pathologies of the single man and woman, see Walter M. Gallichan, *The Great Unmarried* (London, 1916). On Gallichan and his ilk, see Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880–1930* (London, 1985).

⁵⁷*Lloyd’s Sunday News*, March 21, 1920, 8.

⁵⁸*Sunday Pictorial*, quoted in the *Link* (November 1917): 1.

⁵⁹Quoted in the *Link* (January 1921): 1.

⁶⁰*Daily Chronicle*, quoted in the *Link* (October 1919): 1. Barrett also cited a letter in the *Daily Chronicle* that proposed a “Good Fellowship Club” to relieve loneliness and frequent requests in *Lloyd’s Sunday News* for the establishment of a “Bureau of Introduction” (*Link* [February 1920]: 2). He also noted with approval the establishment in America of a “Lonesome Club” by a major newspaper (*Link* [January 1918]: 1).

⁶¹*Daily Mail*, December 23, 1920, 4.

the moral status of "companionship" were momentarily put aside. Yet these new relationships retained their morally ambiguous status in a way that was productive to advertisers. The simultaneous acceptance and condemnation of "companionship" meant that it offered the ideal medium for the exploration of relationships that could also have an ambivalent status. Like the advertisements themselves, advertisers could offer the hint of sexual availability while at the same time retaining an air of "refinement." Moral ambiguity was therefore an advantage that enabled women to deny that their new freedoms were in any way pathological. However, anxieties about women's sexual agency and their perceived primary role in the emergence of the companionship advertisement did not go away. As the 1920s progressed, women were paradoxically seen as the capable and resourceful instigators of new courtship styles but were also assumed to be in sexual peril as a result.

FROM "BOHEMIAN" GIRLS TO "MISS X": THE IMAGE
OF THE ADVERTISER

The characteristic ambivalence that was a feature of the *Link*, *T.P.'s Weekly*, and the correspondence club had the advantage of allowing female advertisers to distance themselves from the moralizing discourses that purported to describe women's sexuality. The advertiser placed herself securely in contrast to the "amateur" prostitute (ready to give sexual favors but to ask nothing in return), the nationally useful eugenic mother, and the youthful and androgynous flapper. Yet the vaguely defined nature of "companionship" and the ambiguity of advertisers' self-presentation led to a struggle to establish the meaning and morality of courtship that was based on the idea of "friendship." The correspondence club provided the ground on which these battles over meaning were fought.

The second major scandal to surround the interwar matchmaking business broke in the mid-1920s over the matrimonial agency and the supposedly sharp practices of the correspondence club. Newspaper investigations sought to show that they represented a clear threat to women and tried to explain the motivations of those women who used these "dangerous" media. The press also uncovered a familiar disjunction between the attitudes of those who patronized these organizations and the views of moral commentators. Like the companionship advertisement, the correspondence club provided a similar opportunity for women to flirt with sexual danger while remaining at arm's length from overt indications of sexual availability. Nevertheless, moral commentators continued to hold women responsible for the emergence of moral dangers, believing that women were assuming the traditional male privilege of sexual adventure. Time and again, the female users of these organizations were obliged to defend and justify their actions to male investigators concerned about their moral welfare.

Female advertisers were able to deflect the attacks of male critics because they held on to the idea that they were utilizing an important resource. Through their advertisements, women sought to demonstrate their “refinement” in an attempt to carve out a space in which women’s agency in courtship could become compatible with respectability. The ads therefore provide access to the everyday gender values that postwar women tried to project.⁶² In this respect they are a useful indicator of the unconscious rules of self-presentation and highlight the fact that the woman advertiser tried to convey a self-protective moral ambiguity. Clearly, some key words like “bohemian” or “broad-minded,” which according to *T.P.’s Weekly* meant “so much or so little to various readers” that their use had to be controlled, carried a clear suggestion of adventure.⁶³ On the other hand, some formulations belied the supposedly liberated character of the “modern” woman. “Educated” and “refined” were two of the most popular self-descriptions, as were “domesticated” and “sincere.” “Lonely” was also commonly used by men as well as women. Its use perhaps sought to indicate a certain necessity in taking out the advertisement that preemptively reassured the respondent against being paired with a frivolous adventurer. Similarly, the prevalence of “widows” and “ladies” might be regarded as sufficient to deter the casual lothario. These descriptions were, however, often used in conjunction with “cheery,” “jolly,” and other indications of “brightness” and “sportiness.”⁶⁴ Overall, the impression presented by female advertisers is of genteel rebellion. Women’s advertisements offered a flash of daring combined with sincerity and a concern for safety, perhaps reflecting a desire to deflect some of the moral anxiety that attached to the medium.

Although the emphasis on “refinement” distanced advertisers from the flapper, the women who placed ads were nevertheless overwhelmingly young, even taking into account the pardonable exaggerations that such

⁶²See, for example, Celia Shalom, “That Great Supermarket of Desire: Attributes of the Desired Other in Personal Advertisements,” in Celia Shalom and Keith Harvey, *Language and Desire: Encoding Sex, Romance and Intimacy* (London, 1997), 186–203; Simon Davis, “Men as Success Objects and Women as Sex Objects: A Study of Personal Advertisements,” *Sex Roles* 23.1–2 (1990): 43–50; Richard Koestner and Ladd Wheeler, “Self Presentation in Personal Advertisement: The Influence of Implicit Notions of Attraction and Role Expectations,” *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships* 5 (1988): 149–60.

⁶³*T.P.’s Weekly*, March 20, 1915, 291.

⁶⁴See, for example, *Link* (January 1920). The desired characteristics of men reflected a similar seriousness. Men had to be “reliable, hard-working,” “sensible, honourable,” “educated,” “nice,” and equally “refined.” The most common physical characteristic specified by women was “tall,” closely followed by “good appearance.” On the “bachelor girl” and meaning of “bright” or “unconventional” as representing genteel rebellion, see Keble Howard, *The Bachelor Girls and Their Adventures in Search of Independence* (London, 1907); Winifred James, *Bachelor Betty* (London, 1907); Louise Rossi, *An Unconventional Girl* (London, 1896); Annie Armstrong, *Three Bright Girls: A Story of Chance and Mischance* (London, 1892).

advertisements encourage. The average age of *Link* advertisers when stated was nineteen for women and twenty-five for men.⁶⁵ Some of these women were clearly part of the new world of white-collar employment. Where "ladies'" occupations were stated and not covered by the neutral term "business girl," they were secretaries, clerks, teachers, stenographers, and students. A minority described themselves as "working class." Terms like "bachelor girl" similarly suggested a financial independence that thrust women into the world halfway between Edwardian moral safety and post-war emotional self-sufficiency.

Although these self-descriptions suggest caution and "refinement," they nevertheless attracted a great deal of suspicion. Battle between male journalists and female advertisers over the meaning and reputation of the correspondence club erupted in 1927 when the press began to investigate the marriage market in a systematic way. The investigations were launched when the popular weekly *John Bull* commissioned the investigative journalist Sydney Moseley to explore the state of courtship and marriage in Britain. While doing so, he tested the various ways in which it was possible to meet life partners: loitering in the streets in the hope of meeting someone, going to nightclubs, and answering "lonesome" advertisements in the press. The latter turned out, Moseley said, to be placed as bait for the unwary by matrimonial agents, the investigation of whom led him to what he called "the greatest scandal of modern times."⁶⁶ He claimed to have discovered that matrimonial agents were fostering immorality by encouraging "platonic" companionship and pandering to the demands of men and women who were already married. Moseley, posing as a married sexual adventurer who could not obtain a divorce, asked one of these agencies (the Matchmaker and its journal) to put him in touch with women seeking "a good time."⁶⁷ In spite of the fact that the *Matchmaker* claimed that all its advertisers were "absolutely bona-fide and genuine," Moseley's business was not refused, and on payment of ten guineas he was provided with a list of young female correspondents.⁶⁸ To further back up his case Moseley then went through the same routine with one R. Charlesworth, editor of the *Matrimonial Post and Fashionable Advertiser*, again exposing what he presented as a willingness to entertain adultery and sexual adventure.⁶⁹

⁶⁵These figures were calculated from one issue of the *Link* (January 1920). The total number of advertisers of all sexes was 336, of which 158 were women, 144 were "civilians," and 14 were "soldiers and sailors."

⁶⁶*John Bull*, April 2, 1927. See also a similar, fictional investigation of the "Y. X. Bureau" for "people alone and friendless in London" that was the front for a white slavery organization in Basil Tozer, *The Secret Traffic: A Story for the Sophisticated* (London, 1935).

⁶⁷*John Bull*, April 9, 1927, 22.

⁶⁸*Matchmaker* (April 1927): 1.

⁶⁹*John Bull*, April 23, 1927, 14.

John Bull righteously denounced the proprietor of the *Matchmaker*, Thomas Owen, as a moral pest. Owen sued, claiming that his business was wholly legitimate, although he lost after he admitted that “a small part” of his trade was to provide such “platonic friendships.”⁷⁰ Several of these advertisements were read out in court, including one from a “businessman” seeking not matrimony but “a young lady who would teach him dances.”⁷¹ A number of others specified “companionship” rather than any marital objective, and most of those seeking a supposedly asexual “friendship” specified the characteristics of their desired partner in suspicious detail.⁷² The judge doubted whether “platonic friendships” could actually exist and questioned the motives of those seeking such relationships. The word “platonic” was, he said, little more than a euphemism to “cover up what, on the face of it, any man or woman of the world must see as calculated to lead to illicit moral relations being established.”⁷³

Following from these revelations came a series of allegations about the most popular correspondence clubs of the period. In particular, Moseley named the UCC as a “sinister” and “dangerous” operation. The UCC, run out of offices in Victoria by a Mr. Clare, worked by providing a short list of suitable correspondents on payment of a ten-shilling yearly subscription. Further lists were available for an additional fee. Like the *Link* and *T.P.’s Weekly*, the UCC offered “friendships” to all classes and either sex while explicitly stating that its functions were nonmatrimonial. Like its predecessors, it also provided a solution to the problems of homosexual men; one of the defendants in the *Link* trial told the police that he had first used the UCC to put himself in touch with other men.⁷⁴

Moseley again posed as a cad, explaining to Mr. Clare that he had “a most unfortunate married life” because his wife would not contemplate divorce. As a result, he would “like association with the opposite sex who are bent on similar pursuits of pleasure,” promising that he “could give any girl or girls a thorough good time.”⁷⁵ Despite these declarations he was put in touch with women who did not share his frivolous intentions and who were, he claimed, unprepared for the immoral nature of the proposed introductions.

⁷⁰*Times*, May 18, 1928, 5. For Moseley’s account of the case, see Sydney A. Moseley, *The Truth about a Journalist* (London, 1935), 254–55; and Sydney A. Moseley, *The Private Diaries of Sydney Moseley* (London, 1960), 290–91. Questions were asked in Parliament about the case. See the *Times*, May 25, 1928, 8.

⁷¹*Times*, May 18, 1928, 5.

⁷²For example, the notices from the *Matchmaker* that advertised a “Gentleman, age 47” wishing to meet a “smart young lady . . . slim, not tall, for companionship only.” Another “Gentleman” wanted to “meet good looking lady, under 30 . . . with a view to comradeship on 50-50 basis.” One “lady . . . stylish in dress” wanted “a real good pal” to “come and have a cup of tea” (*Times*, May 22, 1928, 5; *Daily Express*, May 17, 1928, 11).

⁷³*Daily Express*, May 22, 1928, 11.

⁷⁴*Daily Telegraph*, June 10, 1921, 3.

⁷⁵*John Bull*, April 27, 1927, 10.

In spite of the apparent lack of control over advertisers and the imagined consequences of advertising to meet "friends," the women who were contacted by Moseley or who appeared in court had fewer qualms about placing advertisements than their moralizing critics. One witness was a twenty-four-year-old clerk who was allowed to give evidence anonymously during the *Matchmaker* libel trial. Although "Miss X," as she was dubbed by the courts, had failed to meet her dream man, she confidently asserted her right to put herself in what *John Bull* clearly regarded as extreme danger. She had first used the *Matchmaker* in 1925, and in addition to a number of more disappointing contacts had become, in her words, "fixed up" or "practically engaged" to a respectable soldier. The court clearly had other ideas about the proper behavior of women in using such agencies. To the defense and to *John Bull*, Miss X clearly came across as "the kind of girl who ought to have somebody to save you from yourself in this kind of thing."⁷⁶ Moseley's barrister, Norman Birkett, reminded her that she was only nineteen at the time of her first advertisement and that she "might have been ruined by some ruffian or adventurer."⁷⁷

Yet Miss X vehemently disagreed. She did not need saving at all and was, she said, "quite capable of looking after [herself]."⁷⁸ The scenario of ruin outlined by Birkett, she said, was "not likely." When asked if she realized that she was "on the brink of a very great tragedy" for herself, Miss X replied calmly that she was afraid she did not. The four men she had met via the *Matchmaker* had not been drunken immoralists or racially alarming Mexican "half castes," as Moseley had claimed in his *John Bull* articles. Instead, they had been "very nice and quite proper persons to be introduced to her." She had had "no alarming experiences and was not the victim of fleecing, unscrupulous or otherwise."⁷⁹

Other women who advertised clearly felt the same way; they experienced the correspondence club and matrimonial agency as useful services, albeit tinged with risk. Like the customers of the *Link*, the female patrons of the UCC and the *Matchmaker* were very far from the victims of male lust envisaged by men like Moseley. This fact was unwittingly revealed by Moseley's investigation of UCC subscribers. Although one was disappointingly frivolous in that she described herself as "sporty [and] fond of life," other subscribers to the UCC were suitably serious. Their motives ranged from the familiar assertion of "loneliness" to the aspiration of acquiring a "pal." Another correspondent stated that she joined the UCC because "I like anything with a bit of adventure attached."⁸⁰ One subscriber to the *Matchmaker* told Moseley in response to his letters that she was "so very

⁷⁶*Daily Express*, May 17, 1928, 11.

⁷⁷*Times*, May 17, 1928, 5.

⁷⁸*Daily Express*, May 18, 1928, 11.

⁷⁹*Times*, May 17, 1928, 5.

⁸⁰*John Bull*, April 30, 1927, 10.

lonely” and hoping to “meet a really nice man.” Another, whom Moseley claimed to have met, told him that the *Matchmaker* was her way out of a “dull and soul-destroying” home life, “the awful suburban atmosphere, [and] the same thing day after day, the same train at the same time to the same office.”⁸¹ Although Moseley used these declarations to suggest that these women were unaware of the potentially rapacious quality of male advertisers, it is not implausible to suggest that they had a far greater experience of what to expect than he had and welcomed the potential excitement on offer.

Did these contacts actually lead to sexual relations, as the critics of the correspondence club supposed? For the advertisers, they clearly represented a form of adventure, the exact nature of which is difficult to determine. Moseley and others were convinced that casual, illicit sex would result, even if women like Miss X did not acknowledge that fact. In any case, *John Bull* certainly persisted in presenting the correspondence club and the marriage bureau as vehicles for the expression of male lust. In particular, Moseley’s articles prompted a response from one reader who was presented as one of the “victims” of the UCC, “Clare’s terrible club.” This woman, Moseley argued, was also “driven by loneliness” to use the UCC but found that the only men willing to respond made unwelcome advances. He claimed that one of the woman’s respondents said he was writing a book on the effects of drugs and suggested that she “should join him in making improper experiments while under their influence.” Another writer sent her obscene photographs “accompanied by a letter of a disgusting character,” while another, having won her confidence with his eloquent letters, finally confessed that he was married and hoped to enlist her support in gaining a divorce by joining him in an adulterous liaison. Only one of her correspondents was really “seeking an honourable friendship.”⁸²

John Bull stuck by the idea that modern women needed protection from male rapacity. The male users of the UCC were simply assumed to be cads and scoundrels. This assumption allowed *John Bull* to insist that since men were largely unchanged, it was women’s sexual boldness that had led to the degradation of morals and that women were therefore ultimately responsible. By arguing that women’s independence was driving a new moral agenda, Moseley could hold women like Miss X responsible for social change and call them to account when new kinds of heterosexual relations produced social pathologies. Thus, the wartime “amateur” or

⁸¹ *John Bull*, April 16, 1927, 10.

⁸² *John Bull*, May 14, 1927, 11. These articles followed a similar exposé of the nonmatrimonial British Correspondence Circle in *John Bull*, March 12, 1927. Moseley’s views were contradictory to those he expressed in his semi-autobiographical novel, *Love’s Ordeal: An Unconventional Romance* (London, 1923), in which the character based on the author has a brief (but obviously doomed) liaison with another man’s wife.

the postwar adolescent could be identified as the sexual aggressor, while at the same time being presented as largely unaware of the extreme danger in which she was placing herself. The investigations into the marriage market therefore show how those who sought to buttress English morals by controlling women's bodies continued to define personal restriction as a form of welfare. The "bohemian" advertiser thought she could "look after herself," but her would-be protectors thought differently.

In the eyes of these critics, women advertisers took on the characteristics of their chosen medium. Although men and women used the companionship advertisement and the correspondence club in equal numbers, female advertisers were thought to be best suited to the form. Women's independence was symbolized by these new, less serious kinds of courtship and self-presentation. In a familiar lament, critics assumed that the postwar woman had been "spoiled by war-time pleasures,"⁸³ and, like her advertisements, she had become frivolous and insincere. Even though Alfred Barrett claimed that he had started the *Link* in response to *male* loneliness, its early issues promised to cater specifically to women. The shortage of men during the war, Barrett had suggested, made the question of courtship even more difficult and increased the chances of women meeting "Mr. Wrong." The result was that if a presentable man spoke to a woman in the potentially dangerous situations of street, subway, and tramcar, she was "less inclined to turn a deaf ear than formerly." It was reasonable to assume, he argued, that "if a man speaks to you in the street and you give him the slightest encouragement he will by hook or by crook get your address, and then, whether he is good or bad, you stand more or less committed without having time to think about it." Such a situation, Barrett promised, "is exactly what we exist to avoid."⁸⁴

Those in the mainstream press who noticed the new style of courtship also made the connection between femininity, frivolity, and self-advertising. Richard George, writing about the *Link* for the *Daily Mirror* in 1919, suggested that the form of the companionship advertisement was more suitable to the insincere appetites of the woman who had been transformed by her wartime experiences. Male advertisers, on the other hand, were "much more in straightforward earnest than most of the women," and they were frank about their failings. Some "made no bones about being hard-up," while others, according to George, clearly had not got the hang of the medium. One described himself as having "been an ass," another was a "'common or garden' Tommy," while yet another had "no accomplishments." The women, however, were "much too 'jolly,' 'unconventional,' 'sporty' and 'fed up.'" They appeared to "have no ideas above 'a good time,' with 'tall dark'—this is the favourite combination, it appears—

⁸³*Daily Mirror*, April 3, 1919, 7.

⁸⁴*Cupid's Messenger* (January 1916): 1.

‘boys’ who will take them out.” George’s response was emphatic: “[T]hank heaven, I am a man, and was safely married before the war.”⁸⁵

The supposed inauthenticity of advertising as a medium was also transferred onto the whims and wishes of the “modern miss.”⁸⁶ From the late nineteenth century onward, the form of modern advertising with its appeal to the senses and its witty phrases was thought specifically to attract women, whose greater emotional responses guaranteed their status as ideal consumers.⁸⁷ The apparently specious claims, blatant attractions, and transient nature of advertising also made it the ideal metaphor for the falsity and frivolity of the modern girl. Advertising in general therefore became a medium in which women seemed particularly comfortable. Like the advertiser, the modern girl was “blatant” or “conspicuous” and had learned the trick of artful self-presentation. As the protagonist of Clarice Laurence’s 1915 novel, *The Diary of a Flirt*, put it, “we live in an age of placards, and the person who wears most gracefully the biggest placard carries off the prize.”⁸⁸ Similarly, the *Daily Mirror* suggested in 1922 that women were merely following the spirit of the age. The twentieth century was an “age of advertisement” that expounded the principle that “if you don’t advertise yourself nobody notices you.”⁸⁹ Although the small advertisement hardly fulfilled the same function as a placard, it could still have an influence on language. According to Leonard Rossiter, even conversation had been altered by the distilled language of publicity. Everyday speech now contained “glib and pithy little catchwords” that mimicked the “art of propagandism.”⁹⁰

The inauthenticity of “sex-companionships” was an idea that depended on the understanding that marriage and motherhood were the proper

⁸⁵*Daily Mirror*, April 3, 1919, 7.

⁸⁶On the association of women with consumption, see Mary Louise Roberts, “Gender, Consumption, and Commodity Culture,” *American Historical Review* 103.3 (1998): 817–44; Roberts, *Civilisation without Sexes*; Erika Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London’s West End* (Princeton, NJ, 2000); Mica Nava, “Modernity’s Disavowal: Women, the City and the Department Store,” in Mica Nava and Alan O’Shea, eds., *Modern Times* (London, 1996), 38–76. On advertising and modernity, see Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwarz, eds., *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life* (Berkeley, 1995).

⁸⁷See, for this view, Walter Dill Scott, *The Psychology of Advertising: A Simple Exposition of the Principles of Psychology in the Relation to Successful Advertising* (London, 1909), 111–14. He argued that women make purchasing decisions on the basis of suggestion much more readily than men: “Here the advertiser can do most by appealing to the artistic and sentimental natures of the possible customers.” With women, “that which awakens the emotion would be likely to be chosen” (111). On the supposed trickery of advertising, see H. G. Wells, *Tono-Bungay* (London, 1908); Oliver Onions, *Good Boy Seldom: A Romance of Advertisement* (London, 1911).

⁸⁸Clarice Laurence, *The Diary of a Flirt* (London, 1915), 13.

⁸⁹*Daily Mirror*, April 27, 1922, 7.

⁹⁰Leonard Rossiter, *The Sex Age* (London, 1928), 47. See also Herbert Farjeon and Horace Horsnell’s play *Advertising April, or, The Girl Who Made the Sunshine Jealous, a Comedy in III Acts* (Oxford, 1922).

aims of women's sexuality. It was a short step from that conclusion to the idea that all other kinds of friendship with men must be either frivolous or oversexed. Advertising was simply one aspect of this feminine insincerity. Women who indulged in such companionships were either unaware of their peril, as Sydney Moseley tried to point out, or immoral. Yet the advertisers themselves appeared to agree with Alfred Barrett's dictum that "the modern maid is nothing if not resourceful and self-reliant."⁹¹ The women who used the correspondence club for the purpose of making such relationships clearly had their own view of propriety and did not see the same moral danger their critics perceived.

The companionship advertisements and correspondence clubs that emerged in England before the First World War represented and facilitated new styles of courtship and intimacy. They provided a means for turning the emerging idea of "sex-companionship" into social practice. But the "friendship" they promoted occupied a morally ambiguous territory. If that friendship involved both sexes, it could be intimate or casual, transitory or permanent; if it involved one's own sex, it could encompass a homosexual attachment. Because of that ambiguity, tensions surrounded the *Link*, the UCC, and similar clubs and publications; occasionally, these tensions erupted in the press and in the courts. Yet, at the same time that it aroused the ire of self-appointed guardians of moral virtue, this ambiguity insured the usefulness of the advertisements and clubs to men and women seeking new forms of intimacy. The frank acknowledgment of the nonmatrimonial quality of these relationships allowed "modern" women to examine their new freedoms without being associated with immoral or pathological uses of that liberty.

Companionship advertising presented the modern woman as resourceful, hardheaded, and an active agent in the process of courtship. To some, her use of the *Link* and similar media meant she had turned away from romance. But Barrett insisted all along that he was not destroying romance but merely reinventing it. In spite of assisting in the decline of the old moral order and its replacement by "something entirely new and subversive," Barrett maintained that the "modern maid" would still entertain dreams of the "eternal He." In spite of the new order, a kiss was still a kiss, and "men and maidens [will] still walk in couples in the gloaming."⁹² The companionship ad and the correspondence club provided both a context for the sexual "modernity" of the postwar woman as well as a reassuring message that in spite of everything all could be well between the sexes.

Nevertheless, the *Link* case and the later scandals surrounding the *Matchmaker* and the UCC highlighted the fact that women's sexual agency became problematic during and after World War I. While for Miss X and many like her, using these new forms of self-presentation was a perfectly

⁹¹*Link* (July 1916): 2.

⁹²*Ibid.*

ordinary thing to do, for Sydney Moseley and others devoted to traditional morality and “social hygiene,” lurking behind the “sporty” girl was the specter of venereal disease, illegitimacy, and racial degeneration.

New methods of advertising should be placed alongside those other technologies that allowed women to emerge from Edwardian moral confinement: the bicycle, the department store, the self-contained flat, the contraceptive cap, and the new, more comfortable fashions. They should also be seen as one of the forces propelling homosexuality into culture as a sign of sexual “modernity.” While none of these new technologies escaped moral condemnation, they nevertheless went to the heart of ordinary life and did not remain at its margins. The fate of the *Link* shows that after 1914 some morally dubious heterosexual freedoms occupied the same spaces, literally and figuratively, as homosexual intimacies. The sporty girl and the artistic boy therefore belong together as significant twentieth-century inventions.