In “Why Compare?” R. Radhakrishnan argues that “wanting to learn from ‘other’ experiences . . . is and should be the real motive behind any comparative endeavor and not just the imperative to hector, proselytize, or hierarchize difference in the name of a dominant ‘superior’ identity.” For most cultural comparison produced in eighteenth-century Britain, however, this was decidedly not the goal. This chapter begins by exploring the intellectual and cultural work of comparing marriage practices and women’s status in marriage in texts as varied as Hymen: An Accurate Description of the Ceremonies Used in Marriage, by Every Nation in the Known World (1760) and The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks (1771). Despite their different audiences and purposes, these texts use differences in marriage customs as a metric for evaluating a group’s “civilized” status. And in Britain, where individuals might contract marriages based on affection rather than parental prerogative, the ideal of companionate marriage came to be valued as more free and more personally fulfilling than other marriage practices.

However, by their very nature comparisons have the potential to de-naturalize customs and social norms introducing other possibilities for organizing sociality. As quickly as “Uxorious” imagines British marriage as the most enlightened of “the ceremonies used in marriage by every nation in the known world,” in The Female American (1767), novelist “Unca Eliza Winkfield” (pseudonym) shifts the terms of debate for claims of British women’s progress through companionate marriage. Comparing the dull and “commonly domestick” nature of most women’s lives with Native American women’s mobility and romantic autonomy, The Female American undercuts the imperialist rhetoric of “Uxorious” and Millar.

This chapter investigates comparative analyses of courtship traditions
in three Enlightenment genres: popular “marriage-rites” compilations; Scottish Enlightenment stadial theory; and an early transatlantic Anglophone novel. By highlighting Enlightenment investments in marital comparison, this chapter illuminates the disruptive potential that reports of indigenous American courtship practices had for claims of British women’s supposedly superior status vis-à-vis marriage. This disruptive power is most evident, though, in The Female American, a novel in which hybrid points of view and playful narrative techniques dislodge British claims for progressive forms of marital liberty.

Marriage-Rites Anthologies: National and Imperial Propaganda

In “‘Matrimonial Ceremonies Displayed’: Popular Ethnography and Enlightened Imperialism,” Lisa O’Connell outlines the history of the nonfiction marriage-rites genre beginning in 1680 with Louis de Gaya’s Cérémonies nuptiales de toutes les nations, which was translated into English in 1685, and again in 1687 as Matrimonial Customs; or, The Various Ceremonies, and Divers Ways of Celebrating Weddings, Practised amongst All the Nations, in the Whole World. Compiled from various travelers’ accounts of courtship and marriage traditions, these texts combine the exotic and erotic with great success. As these anthologies adapt to the changing tastes and demographics of eighteenth-century readers, they shift from the titillating anecdotes and quasi-pornographic addendums of Thomas Brown’s Marriage Ceremonies (1697) to the didactic, nationalist, and pro-imperial comparative agendas that emerge in the mid- to late eighteenth century. For instance, Thomas Salmon’s Critical Essays Concerning Marriage (1724) capitalizes on an expanding demographic of female readers by including sections on marital advice and moral essays in the vein of popular conduct books. Moreover, it notably shifts the categories of comparison from religious groups (Christians, Jews, Muslims, and so on) to ethnic groups and larger geopolitical entities across Europe, Asia, Africa, and America. Such a move emphasizes the way that women’s status and condition were being used as a comparative tool for evaluating differences between nation-states, a concept emerging precisely at this time. Marriage-rites volumes continue to be popular into the Victorian era with new titles such as Lorenzo Niles Fowler’s Marriage: Its History and Ceremonies; with a Phrenological and Physiological Exposition of the Functions and Qualifications for Happy Marriages (1847) appearing alongside continually popular late nineteenth-century reissues of Thomas Brown’s Matrimonial Ceremonies Displayed (1886).
Coinciding with British legal reformations such as Hardwicke’s Marriage Bill of 1753, mid-century marriage-rites anthologies such as Hymen: An Accurate Description of the Ceremonies Used in Marriage, by Every Nation in the Known World (1760) assure British women that their courtship customs (and the recent legal changes regulating marriage) secure them more advanced institutions and more personally satisfying intimate relations than anywhere else in the world. Dedicated to the “Ladies of Great Britain and Ireland” by “Uxorious,” Hymen organizes its separate chapters on marriage customs somewhat haphazardly, beginning with Jews and moving on to Romans, Peruvians, Caribes, [East] Indians, Floridians, “inhabitants of Hudson’s-bay, Mississippi, and Canada,” Mexicans, Indians in New Mexico, Nicaraguans, Brazilians, Americans, “Savages of Darien,” and “New Grenada,” Bramins, Chinese, Persians, Japanese, Greeks, English, Mahometans, and Hottentots. As a compilation of traveler’s sketches and other reports, Hymen essentially aims for the fascinating marital anecdote. The connecting tissue between these comparisons is puzzling, however. Why, for instance, are East Indians wedged between Caribes and Floridians? The relation is not simply alphabetical—for example, the English come much later in the anthology. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the work expresses no interest in or recognition of the fact that in any given place, customs change over time. Even the chapter on England, where one might expect more depth, captures no sense of the major recent changes in legal requirements to marry such as a licensed officiate, witnesses, and parental approval attending the Marriage Act of 1753. The only historical changes to English marriage customs that “Uxorious” mentions are changes between Catholic services and post-Reformation Anglican practices, located safely in the past.

A cursory reading of Hymen reveals the author’s recurring interest in incest taboos, premarital sexual contact, polygamy, the exchange of gifts, curious ceremonial proceedings, regulations on separation and divorce, and dealings with adultery. For instance, “early marriages are not customary among the Floridians who dwell near Panuco, yet we are assured they are scarce maids by ten or twelve years of age.” Divorces are easily granted among the American Indians of the Hudson’s Bay region (no tribal names given): Father Hennepin “tells us, that their marriage is not a civil contract; that the husband and wife do not bind themselves to each for life: that they cohabit as long as they like one another, but separate without the least formality as soon as their harmony is interrupted by domestic broils.” Among the “Mahometans,” polygamy is universally practiced, but this practice does not, according to “Uxorious,” increase
the population. The moral judgment lodged in this comparison is fairly obvious: the excesses of sensuality permitted by “Mahometan” polygamy are not, in fact, generative. *Hymen* ends with the most “curious” of all anecdotes, describing a “Hottentot” ceremony in which the priest repeatedly “pisses” on the bride and groom while offering good wishes such as “May you live long and happy together; may you have a son before the end of the year; may this son live to be a comfort to you in your old age; may this son prove to be a man of courage and a good huntsman.” By comparison, “Uxorious” describes the English customs of publishing the banns in church, official vows, the exchange of rings, and so on, explaining that “these mutual contracts are essentially necessary to preserve the honor and secure the safety of mankind.” *Hymen* strategically compares differences in marriage rites, implicitly noting that binding “contracts” are essential requirements for “civilized” marriages. In his account of English customs, “Uxorious” emphasizes the legal and institutional structures that legitimate English marriage as well as the public nature of the ceremony. Although the chapter on English traditions references curious local practices such as the “breeding woman’s oath,” in which an unwed mother may swear to a father’s identity and he must pay a tax for the child, the bulk of the chapter touts customs “approved by the church or the governors of it.”

For “Uxorious,” marital diversity is ultimately linked to a narrative of civilization and progress. These comparisons illustrate that “without [women] the human race had never emerged from the rude and savage state.” Moreover, woman’s “influence has been always the greatest in countries most distinguished for elegance and refinement of taste.” In a flourish of national bombast, “Uxorious” claims that “English ladies” are “indulged in liberties which foreigners can hardly give credit to.” According to “Uxorious,” then, women are responsible for the “polish” that has made civilized countries more advanced; more particularly, all the glory of England’s “elegance and refinement” is owing to the “liberties” English men bestow on women.

This rhetoric will sound familiar to readers of Scottish Enlightenment philosophy by Adam Smith, David Hume, William Robertson, and others. For instance, in *The History of Women* (1779), William Alexander explicitly connects women’s “liberties” and the national attainment of civility when he argues that “the rank, therefore, and condition, in which we find women in any country, mark out to us with great precision, the exact point in the scale of civil society, to which the people of such country have arrived.” In short, women, and the kinds of courtships and
marriages women are subject to, become the measuring sticks by which one could calculate any nation’s progress toward civility. Eighteenth-century comparisons of marriage rites around the globe not only exotize culturally specific sexual behaviors, but they also explicitly evaluate and judge others as more or less civilized.\(^\text{11}\) At their core, the comparisons inherent in the British marriage-rites genre promote national chauvinism. Representing the customs of others as absurd, these texts attempt to convince British couples to marry, reproduce, and support the status quo.

*The Economics of Romance: John Millar’s Stadial History*

Whereas marriage-rites anthologies target a popular readership, Scottish Enlightenment “stadial” or “conjectural” histories are primarily aimed at academic and learned readers. As with marriage-rites anthologies, though, stadial histories employ a cross-cultural comparative methodology to situate Britons as the most advanced in the various “stages” of human progress. For instance, according to Adam Smith’s stadial model, humans progress through four stages of economic development: a hunter-gatherer phase, a shepherding phase, an agricultural phase, and, finally, a commercial phase.\(^\text{12}\) In each stage of increasing economic complexity, the Scots also trace supposed advances in institutions, cultural norms, and interpersonal relationships. They explicitly describe manners and feelings as contingent on the national level of economic progress. Not surprisingly, countries with commercial economies such as Great Britain supposedly produce the most advanced and refined manners. National differences in women’s status and treatment are key metrics in these economic comparisons. As William Alexander observes, “were their history entirely silent on every other subject, and only mentioned the manner in which they treated their women, we should, from thence, be enabled to form a tolerable judgment of the barbarity, or culture of their manners.”\(^\text{13}\)

As a former student of Adam Smith, John Millar builds on and extends Smith’s four-stage theory of human advancement. Millar’s *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* (1771) offers the most sophisticated account of women’s progress within his larger project to locate the origins of social and political authority or “rank.”\(^\text{14}\) Millar argues that economically advanced societies offer women the most respect as well as the most room for determining their own personal happiness in marriage. Unlike Adam Smith, who barely mentions gender differences, or Lord Kames, who segregates women’s history to a separate section of his *Sketches of the History of Man* (1774), Millar grounds his theory of the origins of
rank in heterosexual relationships. As Carol Pateman and others have shown, contract theorists such as John Locke and Thomas Hobbes—who fantasize a “state of nature” as a space for imagining the rise of political institutions—erase gender inequalities in their fantasies of liberal individuals who “contract” to work together, thus creating governments. They ignore and erase women’s agency in the contracting process and presume masculine authority—patriarchy—as a baseline. Millar, fascinatingly, does not ignore the question of how men came to hold their supposedly universal right to govern women and families. However his account is not ideologically neutral. He confronts but, finally, dodges the contradictions inherent in patriarchal power when he grapples with reports of the matrilineal kin networks and marriage practices of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) in what will become New York, Ontario, and Quebec. Ultimately, Millar cannot reconcile nonpatriarchal Haudenosaunee marriage and family structures in his stadial theories of women’s “progress,” which he tracks through supposedly increasing romantic attachments between heterosexual couples across the four stages of economic development. Millar’s inability to account for matrilineal Haudenosaunee social structures signals the propagandistic nationalism inherent in his comparative methodology; however, it also highlights the ways comparative analysis can undermine the very hierarchies it is summoned to establish.

Plotting a steady increase in sexual intimacy from the supposed animal lust of the “rudest” economic stage to the companionate-marriage ideal of his own British commercial society, Millar theorizes psychological, emotional, and sexual development occurring alongside economic development. Millar notes that women’s status is dependent on three criteria: first, the ease of sexual gratification; second, the value of women’s work; and third, the leisure time available for courting. In the hunting stage, there is no time for romance: “When men are in danger of perishing for hunger . . . when they are unable to shelter themselves from beasts of prey, or from enemies of their own kind . . . their constitution would surely be ill adapted to their circumstances, were they endowed with a refined taste of pleasure, and capable of feeling the delicate distresses and enjoyments of love, accompanied with all those elegant sentiments, which, in a civilized and enlightened age, are naturally derived from that passion. Dispositions of this nature would be altogether misplaced in the breast of a savage.” For Millar, love is limited by the social and economic conditions in which it takes shape. When subsistence proves difficult, sex is simply an animal instinct, not an emotional commitment. Men in this stage are supposedly severe toward women because they are not emotionally invested.
Moreover, there is no need for romance when men have immediate and unlimited sexual access to women. While this description might imply that so-called savage societies are one prolonged orgiastic experience, Millar reluctantly admits, “It is true, that, even in early ages, some sort of marriage, or permanent union between persons of different sexes, has been almost universally established.” However, he points out that even “inferior animals” act on a similar principle in preserving their young. In Millar’s analysis, marriage among “rude people” is lacking in the most essential point: mutual affection. The male never marries from “particular inclination;” he “discovers no preference” and allows his parents to conduct the matter “without concerning himself.” Unlike the depth of feeling shared by partners in a companionate marriage, “savage” marriage is “completed, on both sides, with the most perfect indifference.”

Marriage and family ought to be the products of choice, Millar urges. Of course, mutual affection and choice are only possible in the commercial stage of development.

Millar continues his description of advances in women’s status in the middle two of the four stages. In the pastoral stage, new restrictions on heterosocial activity increase the value of women more generally. Instead of being interchangeable objects of desire, women present opportunities for male choice; they inspire “inclination and sentiment.” Moreover, increased wealth introduces distinctions of rank that lead to rivalries and jealousies, especially with regard to the distribution of women. In the later agricultural age, chivalry becomes the new standard of behavior toward women: “The sincere and faithful passion, which commonly occupied the heart of every warrior, and which he professed upon all occasions, was naturally productive of the utmost purity of manners, and of great respect and veneration for the female sex.” Ironically, Millar identifies this as the high point in women’s status, finding a connection between delicate behavior toward women and advances in the arts such as bards, wandering minstrels, the poetry of Spenser, and long prose romances. Although these high standards gradually change, the legacy of chivalry “has given an air of refinement to the intercourse of the sexes, which contributes to heighten the elegant pleasures of society, and may therefore be considered as a valuable improvement in society.”

Millar argues that women’s status improves when men have restricted sexual access to women. Men respect and value women when society creates “artificial” social barriers such as modesty and reserve between the sexes. Chastity, then, is a sign of progress; but it is only possible when the right social and economic conditions—such as restrictions on heterosocial contact and
increased leisure time for courting—occur in later stages of economic development: “In consequence of these improvements the virtue of chastity begins to be recognized; for when love becomes a passion, instead of being a mere sensual appetite, it is natural to think that those affections which are not dissipated by variety of enjoyment, will be the purest and the strongest.”23 Affection and emotional commitment are the result of postponed sexual fulfillment made possible in economically advanced shepherding societies.

Sexual access and leisure time for courting are not the only measures of women’s status, however; the value of women’s work is another significant factor. Millar suggests that in hunting societies, men value skills useful in battle or the chase; in this, women cannot easily contribute. Since women cannot compete with men’s superior strength and courage, “it falls upon them to manage all the inferior concerns of the household, and to perform such domestic offices . . . which, however useful, . . . are naturally regarded as mean and servile.” Women are little better than servants forced to endure hard labor: “digging roots, drawing water, carrying wood, milking cattle, dressing the victuals, and rearing the children.”24 David Smits describes this rhetoric as the “squaw drudge” stereotype, a common European misinterpretation of the valuation of gendered labor in many American Indian communities.25 Millar extends the typical “squaw drudge” stereotype, making marriage in the supposed early stages of human development not an opportunity for companionship, but the vehicle for gaining just such a laborer: “To marry a wife must there be the same thing as to purchase a female servant.”26 In his discussion of hunter-gatherer modes of marriage, Millar ignores how capitalism allowed supposedly civilized men to openly purchase multiple women’s labor without any emotional or long-term financial commitment whatsoever.

From the feudal conditions of the agricultural age, Millar proceeds to his contemporary moment: commerce and companionate marriage. Despite an increase in heterosocial contact that makes women more accessible than in the days of chivalry, Millar suggests that women in the commercial stage are better off because they earn new respect as skilled managers of domestic affairs.27 When war and military skill are less valuable than trade and politeness, Millar theorizes that men have a new appreciation for domesticity as well as more time to spend at home. Millar notes that women living in commercial economies are increasingly regarded for “their useful or agreeable talents,” which extend beyond household duties to include domestic affections: “In this situation, the
women become, neither the slaves, nor the idols of the other sex, but the friends and companions.”

Here the narrative sounds much like the standard courtship novel of the day. Essentially, Millar argues that men and women must have time to appreciate and to please one another before marrying. This time is set apart and ritualized through particular customs of courtship, time that ideally produces a mutual preference and equal affection.

Millar identifies companionate marriage as a measure not only of women’s progress, but also of social and national progress; indeed, it becomes the ultimate symbol of both. More insidiously, though, Millar describes how domestic affections can be used as tools for controlling women:

[Women] learn to suit their behavior to the circumstances in which they are placed, and to that particular standard of propriety and excellence set before them. Being respected on account of their diligence and proficiency in the various branches of domestic economy, they naturally endeavor to improve and extend those valuable qualifications. They are taught to apply with assiduity to those occupations which fall under their province, and to look upon idleness as the greatest blemish in female character. . . . As their attention is principally bestowed upon the members of their own family, they are led, in a particular manner, to improve those feelings of the heart which are excited by these tender connections, and they are trained up in the practice of all the domestic virtues.

Millar clearly understands that women in commercial societies are trained to invest their time, energy, and emotions toward domestic relations. He subtly suggests that women are best suited for domestic tasks and that the best way to ensure they fulfill such tasks/roles is to affirm “useful” feminine characteristics. Millar sees male politeness (affirming domestic work or “feminine” behaviors) as an ideological tool helpful for controlling women.

Millar rather astoundingly recognizes that gender is culturally constructed. Differences in women’s status, he argues, are the result of specific economic circumstances and cultural values. However, Millar retreats from the notion that gender is only a cultural by-product: “Possessed of peculiar delicacy, and sensibility, whether derived from original constitution, or from her way of life, [woman] is capable of securing the esteem and affection of her husband, by dividing his cares, by sharing his joys, and by soothing his misfortunes.” Ultimately, he offers a narrative where women gain increased social status via the rise of romantic love. His account of women’s progress makes companionate marriage
and domestic affections the ultimate sign of human development. Moreover, he argues that women in his own commercial England benefit from these supposedly more advanced heterosexual relations. Having traced a steady increase in romantic affection and an increasing investment in women’s domestic affections through the four stages of economic development, Millar must now imagine how it was that men came to hold power in the first place. To do so, Millar wrestles with protoethnographic reports of powerful Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) women—reports he will not easily reconcile with his patriarchal theories of development.

In order to show how distinctions of rank evolve into recognizable institutions such as the state, Millar begins by describing how men gain authority over women and establish patriarchy. To show how patriarchy was established, however, one has to imagine and characterize a state prior to patriarchy when it was possible for women to hold power. Millar looks to Haudenosaunee gender relations to establish a historical precedent for such a prepatriarchal “past.” As Millar grapples with reports of Haudenosaunee women’s public participation in their communities, though, he experiences an epistemological and narrative crisis. He cannot reconcile the data on Haudenosaunee gender arrangements with his stadal framework. For if women could and, in some places, did hold power, how did they lose it? And was that loss of political and social power really compensated for by the relatively recent companionate-marriage ideal? Millar’s story of the rise of patriarchy contains a trace of this epistemological crisis as his comparisons fold back on him.

In a section titled “The influence acquired by the mother of a family before marriage is completely established,” Millar addresses the challenge of solidifying patriarchy prior to the institutionalization of “civilized” marriage, that is, before men made women their legal property. Millar’s task proves difficult; he must simultaneously explain away Haudenosaunee women’s power and convince English women that they have the best marital arrangements. He does this, in part, by making contemporary Haudenosaunee women’s power seem primitive, part of an untenable past. The custom of matrilineal genealogy, Millar notes, is as common “among the ancient inhabitants of Attica; as it [is] at present among several tribes of the natives of North America, and of the Indians upon the coast of Malabar. In this situation the mother of a numerous family, who lives at a distance from her other relations, will often be raised to a degree of rank and dignity to which, from her sex, she would not otherwise be entitled.” Millar clearly engages in what the anthropologist Johannes Fabian calls a denial of coevalness, a view of time that locates supposedly
primitive peoples in a hypothetical past not equally living in the present alongside “modern” peoples. For Millar, this is a time—both “at present” and among the “ancient[s]”—when “savage” women possess(ed) power in their communities and over their families. He concludes: “In a country where children have no acquaintance with their father, and are not indebted to him for subsistence and protection, they can hardly fail, during a considerable part of their life, to regard their mother as the principal person in the family. This is in all probability the source of that influence which appears to have been possessed by women in several rude and barbarous parts of the world.” Although Britons exist in a present that excludes matrilineal kin structures, the difficulty is that other communities also live in this present moment, and they do allow women to head households. As Millar acknowledges, in his contemporary moment Haudenosaunee people trace their genealogies through the mother’s line and grant women voting rights in tribal assemblies. “The North American tribes,” Millar observes, “are accustomed to admit their women into their public councils, and even to allow them the privilege of being first called to give their opinion upon every subject of deliberation.” Millar downplays this authority by claiming a perceived lack of emotional fulfillment on the part of Haudenosaunee women. He reassures his readers that “the women of North America do not arrive at this [political] influence . . . till after a certain age, . . . before this period they are commonly treated as the slaves of men; and that there is no country in the world where the female sex is in general more neglected and despised.” Here, again, is the rhetoric of the “squaw drudge,” the emotionally unfulfilled “slaves of men.” As I show in greater detail in the next chapter, this stereotype is quite inaccurate. Given the Enlightenment investment in companionate marriage, this last point proves most damning of all, for emotional affection supposedly marks the great divide between utilitarian “savage” sex and affectionate “civilized” marriage. Still Millar admits that “in a country where marriage is unknown, females are commonly exalted to be the heads of families, or chiefs, and thus acquire an authority, which notwithstanding their inferiority in strength, may extend to the direction of war, as well as other transactions.” This level of female authority proves difficult for Millar to reconcile. Its attractiveness to women readers can only be reduced by claiming that mutual affection—women’s emotional companionship—somehow outweighs women’s political and familial authority.

Millar never effectively describes how patriarchal marriage becomes institutionalized in most locations around the world, but at least part of his problem has to do with the strange temporality at work in the stadial
schema. Millar has to describe how patriarchy has already been established in certain locations and how it will happen in other locations—his historical analysis must simultaneously report the past and prescribe the future, equally universal and particular in its parameters. Having faced a time prior to patriarchy that was still in existence in certain “underdeveloped” cultures, Millar seems unable to describe how men claimed and, in some cases, will claim their power. This is an absolutely crucial evasion.

Millar turns to ancient Greek myth, the moment when the women of Attica lost their right to speak in public deliberations, to locate the origins of patriarchy. Firmly rooted in the past, this particular example also suggests a potential future event whereby Haudensaunee women’s political status might conform to “civilized” patriarchal standards. Millar reports that after the construction of Athens was complete, there was a contest between the gods Minerva and Neptune for the honor of naming the city. A public assembly was called and the women supported Minerva, while the men supported Neptune. Ultimately, the women won by a single vote. Shortly thereafter, the city was hit by a forceful sea storm and the citizens feared that Neptune was seeking revenge. “To appease him,” Millar notes, “they resolved to punish the female sex, by whom the offence was committed, and determined that no woman should for the future be admitted into the public assemblies, nor any child be allowed to bear the name of its mother.”

In this account, Greek women’s loss of political influence is punishment pure and simple; it is hard to comprehend it as an act of friendship or an inevitable move toward civility. According to this legend, it was during the same time that “marriage was first established among the Athenians” with the result that “children were no longer accustomed to bear the name of their mother, but that of their father, who, from his superior strength and military talents, became the head and governor of the family; and as the influence of women was thereby greatly diminished, it was to be expected that they should, in a little time, be entirely excluded from those great assemblies which deliberated upon public affairs.” As men assume the role of head of household, Millar conjectures, their domestic authority would naturally transfer to the public arena as well. Millar fantastically declares that women’s loss of political power “was to be expected” as a natural consequence of their diminished social and familial influence. In the end, Millar can only suggest that what women lose in political power they make up in romantic love and male companionship, although this “restoration” does not take place until the economy advances to the commercial stage. His teleology suggests that women’s reward for becoming demure domestic partners is,
eventually, companionate marriage; however, by his own account, there is a long period of suffering and degradation between.

What I find so odd in Millar’s account is how this flimsy fable—so particular in its setting and mythological references—becomes the crux for all of the other descriptions of power and rank in Millar’s book. He seems to hope beyond hope that his readers have forgotten about contemporary Haudenosaunee women selecting chiefs, or at least, that they agree that romance outweighs women’s political participation. Millar quickly moves on to explain how this initial “distinction of rank” leads to more complex iterations such as the authority of the father, the chief, and the sovereign. From here, women are once again relegated to a subplot in the larger story of power and authority. Yet Millar, more than any other conjectural historian, seems haunted by the task of accounting for the disruptive potential of Haudenosaunee gender and marriage traditions. Millar’s comparisons make the myth of women’s progress through companionate marriage visible, allowing readers to question their assumptions about its real benefits for women.

*Debunking Companionate Marriage as Women’s Progress*

The anonymously published *The Female American; or, The Adventures of Unca Eliza Winkfield* (1767) combines familiar themes of transatlantic Anglophone fiction—cross-cultural contact and Atlantic travel—with a female robinsonade plot. Written in the first-person perspective of Unca Eliza Winkfield, a biracial Native American–Caucasian woman, *The Female American* brings together a perplexing number of genres and intertextual referents. Unca Eliza, a self-proclaimed “female American,” is the child of parents involved in a Pocahontas-style romance. She eventually goes to England to be educated and Christianized, is later abandoned on a desert island à la Robinson Crusoe, and eventually converts a neighboring group of American Indians, establishing herself as a prophet and leader of this utopian Christian community. In a complicated series of events, Unca Eliza’s cousin hears of her fate and determines to rescue her. When he finally finds her, Cousin Winkfield marries Unca Eliza and takes over her missionary work. The novel ends with several new narrators giving an account of her discovery and rescue.

Previous scholarship on *The Female American* tends to focus on the novel’s robinsonade qualities and its obviously fictional strategies for surviving and thriving in the Americas. Although this point is often overlooked, Unca Eliza’s adventures are predicated on her single status and
her repeated rejection of marriage offers. Although Unca Eliza does finally marry her cousin, contained by the gravitational pull of what Rachel Blau DuPlessis calls the “conventional” romance ending, the novel challenges the conventionality of a typical companionate-marriage ending by illustrating Unca Eliza’s apathy toward married life. If marriage typically provides a heroine with a happy end to her story, and if it also serves as evidence of national progress, what are readers to make of Unca Eliza’s continued indifference to marriage, her rejection of all ties to England, and her continued career as a missionary and translator even after marriage? Unca Eliza’s life story is more than a robinsonade; her adventures challenge the ideological claim that companionate marriage was a form of progress for women.

Identifying as both English and American Indian, our strong-willed heroine begins by contrasting her freedoms to speak, to move, and to choose her own destiny with the standard lot of women: “The lives of women being commonly domestick, the occurrences of them are generally pretty nearly of the same kind; whilst those of men, frequently more vagrant, subject them often to experience greater vicissitudes, many times wonderful and strange. Though a woman, it has been my lot to have experienced much of the latter; for so wonderful, strange, and uncommon have been the events of my life, that true history, perhaps, never recorded any that were more so.” On the first page, Unca Eliza sets herself apart from ordinary women—her story stands out precisely because it is unlike other women’s stories. This difference can be located in her biracial, bi-cultural heritage; in her Atlantic travels; as well as in her desire to remain single. As the child of a white Virginia colonist and a Native American “princess” whose tribal designation is never named, Unca Eliza informs us early on of her mother’s status, power, and romantic intensity. Pocahontas-like, Unca Eliza’s mother, Unca, rescues her father and falls deeply in love with him. However, Unca’s sister also instantly falls in love with Unca Eliza’s father and just misses rescuing him herself. This jealous aunt tries various means to convince Unca Eliza’s father to choose her over her sister; through this portrait of the two sisters, readers glimpse a world of relatively autonomous, passionate Native women. While one sister acts with kindness and love, the other is jealous to the point of murder. Yet each controls her own romantic destiny, operating outside parental control. This fictional glimpse of Virginia Native women’s relative romantic freedom offers a compelling contrast to the typical pleasures and frustrations of courtship plots.

Unca Eliza’s unusual upbringing precludes the kind of feminine do-
mesticity that makes the lives of women “pretty nearly of the same kind.” For instance, in England Unca Eliza plays up her unique heritage through her external appearance: “My tawny complexion, and the oddity of my dress, attracted every one’s attention, for my mother used to dress me in a kind of mixed habit, neither perfectly in the Indian, nor yet in the European taste.” Every sign leads one to understand her as a blend of identities, neither English nor Indian, but something new: a female American. Even Unca Eliza’s name suggests hybridity; she is named for her Native princess mother and the reigning Queen Elizabeth. She also notes how her class position as an indigenous princess garners her much attention in England. Because of her high-ranking status, our heroine is not dismissed as a “savage”; rather, her abundant display of diamonds and entourage of Native slaves makes her hybrid identity more appealing to her English acquaintances. In Unca Eliza’s experience, royalty status overrides racial difference. Finally, Unca Eliza’s education is another factor in her exceptional history. While staying with her Uncle Winkfield, an Anglican minister, she and her female cousins receive the same education as her male cousin. Most unusually, she learns Greek, Latin, Christian theology, and “other polite literature; whilst my good aunt took care of the female part of my education.” This is a thoroughly progressive education and quite remarkable for any woman in this period. Despite her desire to remain single, Unca Eliza is nevertheless courted. She relays her atypical point of view on the routine events of courtship through her unabashedly confident and playful narrative voice. For instance, when she describes her potential eligibility on the English marriage market, Unca Eliza coquettishly acknowledges her potential lovers’ money-grubbing motives. She writes, “Tawny as I was, with my lank black hair, I yet had my admirers, or such they pretended to be; though perhaps my fortune tempted them more than my person, at least I thought so, and accordingly diverted myself at their expense; for none touched my heart.” This is a woman who understands the game of the marriage market as distinct from the rhetoric of companionship; she acknowledges her strengths and weaknesses from the perspective of her English suitors, maintaining an absolute independence throughout. When her cousin woos her, she coyly refuses, saying, “I would never marry any man who could not use a bow and arrow as well as I could.” While this is perhaps simply an avoidance strategy, the quip also suggests that Cousin Winkfield does not live up to Unca Eliza’s culturally distinct gender expectations. When he persists, she laughingly answers him in “the Indian language, of which he was entirely ignorant; and so by degrees wearied him into silence on that head.”
Unca Eliza knowingly deploys her Native language to block her cousin’s courtship. Still, one senses that it is actually Unca Eliza who is wearied by her cousin’s romantic insinuations since she so clearly makes known her preference to remain single. Unca Eliza’s refusal to translate leaves Cousin Winkfield speechless. In his momentary silence, he faces the epistemological impossibility of knowing all there is to this mixed-race female American. Unca Eliza’s untranslated Native speech disrupts the plot’s romantic drive, making possible the robinsonade adventures that follow; at this moment, her Native tongue enables her to avoid becoming “pretty nearly of the same kind.”

The most overt assault on Unca Eliza’s independence and her most overt rejection of marriage up to this point occurs when a ship captain threatens to abandon her on a deserted island unless she marries his son (whereby her person and her inheritance would become the property of another). She flatly refuses this proposition and exerts her utmost strength to retain control over her own destiny. In a bloody battle between her Native slaves and the ship’s crew, she loses; like Robinson Crusoe, she finds herself alone and stranded on what appears to be an empty island. *The Female American* dodges its audience’s likely suspicion that a single young woman would not be able to survive on her own by providing Unca Eliza with a previous islander’s survival guide. Detailing how to gather and store water, how to create an oil lamp and fuel it, as well as how to hunt and gather food, the survival guide is an especially contrived means of granting Eliza independence. Ironically, this solution to Unca Eliza’s presumed feminine weakness undermines her thoroughly independent personality and her self-professed archery skills. For on the island, Unca Eliza suddenly abandons her bow and arrows, remembers her distressing femininity, and continually complains of her utter inability to survive alone in the wild. With her guidebook in hand, though, Unca Eliza settles more comfortably into her solitary life and begins to explore and confidently assert her presence on the island. Like Crusoe, Unca Eliza might eventually wish to declare, “How like a King I look’d . . . the whole Country was my own meer property,” as she learns to domesticate the island’s population of goats or writes a natural history of an unusual species of sloth-like animal she discovers. However, Unca Eliza aims higher than Crusoe’s kingly ambitions; she literally makes herself a god.

The enterprising Unca Eliza soon concocts a plan to Christianize the neighboring Native peoples who visit “her” island. In a supreme example of Unca Eliza’s authoritative voice, she enters a hollowed-out statue and speaks to the visiting group as if she is one of their gods, though
she claims her motive is to convert them. Of course, there are a number of problems with this strategy. First, Unca Eliza speaks as God—a blasphemous and hubristic move even when motivated by good intentions. Second, she speaks as God by talking through an idol—certainly a questionable conversion tactic. Finally, Unca Eliza seemingly appropriates the rhetoric of white imperialist domination—she will “rescue” the Indians from their false worship—in the guise of her missionary work. She draws on the rhetoric of contemporary missionary groups such as the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel to justify her conquest of others.\footnote{46}

But Unca Eliza does \textit{not} need rescuing by white men. She assumes that role herself when she actively “saves” others by converting them to Christianity. With her godlike voice, Unca Eliza declares: “By keeping them ignorant who I was, or how I came to them, I might preserve a superiority over them, sufficient to keep them in awe, and to excite their obedience: yet I determined to speak no untruth.”\footnote{47} Unca Eliza clearly prefers to keep the upper hand in all of her relationships. To ensure her dominance, Unca Eliza, still speaking from the statue, commands:

\begin{quote}
A person shall come to you, like yourselves, and that you may be the less fearful or suspicious, that person shall be a woman, who shall live among you as you do.

\ldots You must be sure to show the greatest respect to her, do every thing that she shall command you, never ask who she is, from whence she comes, or when, or whether she will leave you. Never hinder her from coming to this island when she pleases, nor follow her hither without her leave. You must all believe, and do as she shall instruct you, and never presume to come to this island without her leave, or do anything she forbids.\footnote{48}
\end{quote}

This makes Robinson Crusoe’s capture and enslavement of Friday seem rather paltry by comparison. Unca Eliza manages to extract complete submission and willing obedience from the entire population she intends to convert; she asks not simply for religious obedience, but absolute dominion over every aspect of their lives. Furthermore, Unca Eliza uses her own hybrid subjectivity—her knowledge of Native languages, customs, and beliefs as well as her English education and Christian beliefs—to effect this submission.\footnote{49} She makes her entrance into their community more comfortable by suggesting her “likeness” to her new converts (she looks like them and speaks their language) but, of course, her claim to authority resides in her difference from them.

Unca Eliza’s fantasy of female authority is legitimated by her English background: her father’s cultural patrimony, her uncle’s religious in-
struction, and the Christian imagery of God the Father. Indeed, she often imagines what her uncle would say as she preaches to her potential converts—a haunting instance of colonial mimicry. Unca Eliza straightforwardly borrows Christian theology in what is certainly an imperialist grab for power. She claims this superiority through a dual sense of privilege as a part-European Christian. Her missionary work is a caution against reading this novel as an exuberant expression of early feminism or a strictly anticolonial assertion of indigenous agency; it is neither. Still, this Christian prophetess would not be so successful without her Native language skills and cultural knowledge. Her hybrid identity enables Unca Eliza’s unique relationship to Christianity and to other Native peoples.

Initially, Unca Eliza’s curious and potentially threatening assumption of missionizing colonial authority seems contained by the novel’s conclusion. Unca Eliza is “rescued” by her obstinate lover, Cousin Winkfield, who determines not only to stay with Unca Eliza and take over her missionary practice, but to finally make her a wife as well. Before Unca Eliza submits to this “commonly domestick” fate, however, she offers up a characteristic display of spunk. Having successfully begun the work of converting her Native neighbors and having established herself as a member of their community, Unca Eliza is quite surprised to see her Cousin Winkfield and a number of sailors on “her” old island. When she realizes they are looking for her, she decides to play a trick on them using a familiar tool, the hollowed-out statue of the sun idol. She explains, “The joy of finding my cousin raised my spirits, and I was determined to indulge an adventure which promised much pleasure.” Speaking to the search party from inside the statue, Unca Eliza inquires after her uncle. The crew, including her cousin, are so stunned by the seemingly magical address that they fear it is the voice of an evil spirit. Unca Eliza revels in the hoax: “I could not help being much diverted at their fears; but unwilling to discover myself, I however determined to dissipate their terrors.”

So she sings a hymn particular to her family, knowing that her cousin will recognize it and that the religious nature of the song would calm the crew’s anxieties about evil spirits.

Although she claims that she hopes to “dissipate their terrors,” Unca Eliza actually transforms her uncle’s hymn into a tool for exposing the superstitions of Europeans. Unca Eliza has previously used Christian rhetoric to assert her power over others, but, in this instance, she does not attempt to govern the sailors. She only wants to mischievously resist her cousin’s rescue attempts. This difference reflects Unca Eliza’s recognition of a hierarchy of power that moves from the Winkfields (English, Chris-
tian, male), to the hybrid Unca Eliza (part-English, Christian, female), to the indigenous population (“native,” “heathen”). In the short moment before she reveals herself, Unca Eliza retains a sense of power and control over her own fate. When she finally shows herself, the crew runs back to the ship and Cousin Winkfield is left standing alone and, again, speechless. In this scene, Unca Eliza briefly obtains the apex of her potential powers, manipulating both European and indigenous superstitions.

Almost as if in retaliation for Unca Eliza’s presumption, her first-person narration is abruptly interpolated by the dramatic dialogue of others, a narrative intrusion that weakens Unca Eliza’s control over the story. After their initial reunion, Cousin Winkfield’s voice commands a significant portion of the narrative. He questions Unca Eliza while she relates how she survived on the desolate island. Unca Eliza’s authority over her own story, her ability to portray herself in first-person narration, slips away. When her cousin again declares his love for her, Unca Eliza uncomfortably attempts to dissuade him from staying with her. This time her words lack the power they once commanded; Winkfield announces: “It seems . . . as if providence . . . designs that I shall carry my resolution to teach the Indians into practice, and spend my days with my dear Unca, whether she will or no.” Unca Eliza has no choice at all; she has fallen from godlike power to become a mere wife. She observes, “Though I loved him as a friend and relation, I had never considered him as a lover; nor any other person. It appeared to me, indeed, as if it must be as he would have it, yet the reflection gave me no pleasure.” After holding out for two months, Unca Eliza marries her cousin and turns her missionary efforts over to her properly ordained husband: “From the time of my cousin’s settling here, or rather my husband, as I must now for the future call him, the Indians were properly baptized, married, and many of them, at their earnest desire, admitted to the Lord’s supper. My husband and I spent much of our time in teaching the Christian religion to the children; he the boys and I the girls.”

Her telling admission that she works as a **translator** for her husband—a role she explicitly refused earlier in the story—suggests her fall from power after marriage. Instead of speaking for herself, she must now speak the words of others. At this point, Unca Eliza’s story is almost entirely overrun as first her cousin tells of how he learned of her desertion on the island, and then other characters interrupt Winkfield’s narration to share their parts in the adventure. These narrative interruptions suggest that now that she is rescued, Unca Eliza’s voice is no longer necessary to the story. Official white male voices from ship captains to ordained ministers dominate the novel’s conclusion.
As many eighteenth-century courtship novels do, *The Female American* provides readers with a marriage. But Unca Eliza’s story allows us to see that marriage may not be the happy ending readers expect. We are invited to recognize that for this heroine, at least, marriage is not the goal or reward. Indeed, Unca Eliza expresses “no pleasure” in this most important new relationship. The novel’s female robinsonade plot offers a fleeting alternative to the usual woman’s story, one that capitalizes on the hybrid vantage point of a transatlantic mixed-race Native woman. Unca Eliza’s earlier independence—the result of her status as a single, “female American”—serves as a critique of the supposed privileges of English companionate marriage. Comparing Unca Eliza’s mother’s and aunt’s stories of Native women’s passionate, intimate, and autonomously formed romantic relations with Unca Eliza’s evident loss of power as she reluctantly marries her English cousin demonstrates how the narrative force of the happily-ever-after ending functions as a kind of trap in which Unca Eliza must conform herself to the “commonly domestick” lives of women.

Yet even as Unca Eliza’s marriage reads as a defeat, her spirited resistance and playful determination to avoid the common lot of women stands in opposition to the eighteenth-century novel’s powerful mythos of courtship. For one thing, she continues to work after marriage, extending the missionary inroads she set in motion by translating for her husband and instructing Native girls. As a translator, Unca Eliza has to the opportunity to insert her own agenda, to conspire, and to transform her cousin’s missionary work. Just as she previously used her Native language skills and cultural knowledge as a form of resistance to her cousin’s patriarchal expectations during courtship, Unca Eliza may use her Native language to undermine the patriarchal structures of Christianity in this new “praying” island. Moreover, when Unca Eliza and her missionary friends determine to sever all ties with England in an attempt to prevent the inevitable influx of violence and corruption that accompanies colonization, the resulting isolation could possibly engender more creative and flexible local interpretations of community governance, syncretic religious practice, and gender performance.

While *Hymen* bombastically declares that “English ladies” are “indulged in liberties which foreigners can hardly give credit to,” Unca Eliza prefers the liberties of her single life as a Christian missionary among Native peoples to the supposed “liberties” of English ladies. Even after marriage, Unca Eliza’s island setting enables a new kind of gender dynamic, which she obviously prefers to England. If anyone could
bring such a utopian gender revision to fruition, Unca Eliza is a likely candidate. Finally, given her own surprisingly gender-neutral education, one wonders what instruction Unca Eliza would likely provide to Native women. How would our hybrid heroine “world” this space and how would the indigenous inhabitants reject, revise, and/or create that world with her? I do not claim that Unca Eliza is anticolonial, nor that *The Female American* offers a working model for just social relations. Still, simply imagining such questions indicates how far this woman-centered novel moves beyond the popular courtship plot of its day.

Marriage-rites anthologies and stadial histories assure readers that companionate marriage is not only the best relation in which to experience marriage, but it is also a powerful sign of progress for women and for the nation. These texts use comparisons to measure women’s “liberties” in marriage and rank global marriage traditions, reiterating Britain’s supposedly superior status through these “objective” comparisons. Written in the age of sensibility, texts such as *Hymen* and *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks* prioritize emotional companionship within marriage as the ultimate measure of civilization; however, they do not attempt to account for the many ways women experience satisfaction in sexual and nonsexual relationships inside and outside of marriage. Moreover, these male-authored texts make little room for women’s own voices in their collections of anecdotes and theories.

*The Female American* is, of course, fiction and does not accurately or comprehensively represent a biracial indigenous woman’s experiences; however, the novel proves a more flexible genre in terms of including a Native woman’s perspective and communicating a multiplicity of cultural responses to marriage. From Unca Eliza’s perspective, British marriage is no guarantor of civilization or happiness. Indeed, she rightly understands the English game of courtship as a strategy for acquiring wealth. While this novel rejects the happily-ever-after ending and the reader’s emotional investment in that ending, our emotional dissatisfaction with Unca Eliza’s capitulation to her cousin’s marriage proposal ironically testifies to the genre’s capacious representational strategies for imagining different sociabilities. As a form of protest, Unca Eliza’s unhappy “happy ending” contests the real restrictions of British marriage from a “wonderful, strange, and uncommon” point of view.34