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‘Married at First Sight’: A TV Literature Experiment

Richard O’Brien and Jack Nicholls

Married at First Sight (2015—) is a dating reality show, produced for the British television network Channel 4 by CPL Productions. In 2018, two poets — myself, Richard O’Brien, and Jack Nicholls — were commissioned to assemble a set of (loosely defined) collaborative work by the ‘Grizzly Pear’ reading series, hosted by the University of Birmingham’s creative writing society, Writers’ Bloc. We decided to write a sonnet sequence tracing, episode-by-episode, the journeys of one couple introduced by the programme, property developer Ben and police officer Stephanie. In this post-script, along with the poems themselves (mine about Ben, Jack’s about Stephanie), I combine in roughly equal parts my own observations with an interview with my writing partner, to offer a kind of self-directed reception study: an appropriately collaborative account of our experimental process of producing literature about TV.

An episodic TV series about romance shares certain parameters with the episodic form and repeated tropes traditional to the English sonnet sequence since its 16th century inception. Nonetheless, we were hand-wringingly desperate to avoid the potential for cynicism in marrying ‘high culture’ and pop culture. Our primary strategy to avert that danger, as we explain below, was to stick closely both to the visual images presented by the programme-makers, as a form of ekphrastic adaptation, and to the emotional sincerity of the participants in their search for genuine human connection. Both Jack and I viewed a certain thoroughness, in terms of formal poetics, as part of this sincere engagement. In reflecting on the historical connection between sonnets and the concept of literary immortality, however, we conclude by considering **whether contemporary poetry publishing is any less ephemeral than the reality TV format on which this project is dependent,** and yet to which it might initially appear to be opposed.

The premise of the *Married at First Sight* format, originated in Denmark as *Gift Ved Første Blik*, is that two strangers matched as potentially compatible romantic partners ‘by science’ meet for the first time at the altar and have to negotiate the early stages of married life together, including the honeymoon, co-habitation, and meeting their spouse’s friends and family members (*Married* 2018). This is our version of that initial meeting.

s03e01

Ben

The earth revolves for funtime Benny-boy,
property millionaire at thirty six —
the axis of his mother’s tepid joy,
his father’s bluff vox-poppery. What sticks
in the mind is the man’s utterly naked faith:
his apelike walk, his lion-print moccasins.
He rolls the dice, pictures each card an ace,
then we’re in Poland, baby, sinking gins
and never questioning what love is. Or
bowling about a bare-brick house in Bromley
done up smart for a girl who isn’t there;

hope etched black on his skin which a single smarmy
shop assistant folds into despair.
One kiss: it's back. Let's leave them at the door.

Stephanie

Outside the cock balloon: the club, the hen,
the sash round Stephanie, the future twirled
like loo roll round a Sindy, six wrong men
who changed their minds, the churning of the world
distilling grief to scent to Chardonnay
to flippin eck to is this a mistake
to morningmorningMORNING it's my day,
like nested dreams. They're smooching over cake.
He wears no socks! Will she witness his death?
For work she has to dress up as a cop.
Today? Princessier than the real thing.
Hair, stay. Body, be fictional. Sweat, stop.
Earth, still. She screams and laughs. Enters the ring.
Inside the cock balloon: dark air, held breath.

Though the programme's concept rests on the idea that this kind of data-driven arranged marriage might create more stable unions than traditional dating, Jack notes that at least on the surface the series reads as a 'cynical exercise': though 'ostensibly a scientific experiment in matchmaking,' 'year on year it yields zero positive results, almost as though it weren't an experiment but rather a reality television show.'¹ Similarly, Elizabethan sonnets have less to do with romanticised (and indeed post-Romantic) notions of reciprocated 'true love' than it might seem to the casual reader. For Catherine Bates, a 'negative condition' of wanting and not having is 'what lies at the heart of every sonnet sequence,' and indeed what sustains and impels them:

[H]owever passionately the speaking voice might insist that he aches for his beloved — however urgently he might call on her name, however devoutly he might wish for or earnestly beseech her — the one thing he does *not* want, or not yet, is for her actually to materialize, to come down from her pedestal, or to acquiesce in his demands. (Bates 2011, 106-7)

This deferred gratification is necessary to create 'a situation in which there is necessarily an addressing, importuning, apostrophizing "I"' (Bates 2011, 107). Our sonnets did not themselves inhabit the voices of desiring subjects: they spoke of 'he' and 'she' rather than 'I.' I found, however, that the episodic nature of the TV format — its weekly cliff-hangers and continuations, wherein desired ends are 'achieved ... as temporary stopping-off points or provisional moments when desire pauses all too briefly before it is off again on its hopeless, endless quest,' and its repetitive nature across multiple seasons, a form of 'go[ing] round in circles [...] never to get anywhere' — was well-suited to what Bates calls 'the rehearsal of

¹ Nicholls, Facebook message to author, September 20, 2019. All further quotations from Nicholls are taken from the Word document of interview questions and answers supplied in this message.

intransitive desire' (Bates 2011, 117, 120, 112.). A format ultimately about 'chasing without catching,' 'discontent could be said to be' the 'very content' of *Married at First Sight* as of the Elizabethan sonnet sequence (Bates 2011, 112, 117).

There is a comedy in this self-fulfilling misery which, Bates observes, its early modern proponents often exploit, because 'the sonnet tradition already contains its own negative — its own opposite, contrary or antithesis — within itself' (Bates 2011, 120). This is a 'self-parodying genre,' wherein 'the true parodist [...] will be as attached to the tradition as he says he wants to be detached from it,' and 'to that extent he must remain within the circuit of desire' (Bates 2011, 120). Nonetheless, despite the aspects of irony and parody in Elizabethan sonnets, Jack was keen that our work should resist such mockery, and that his own poems should observe a certain sincerity in their approach to the form. Certainly we were both, in Jack's phrase, 'absolutely terrified' that 'the sequence could be reduced to, or thought of as, us translating something "lowbrow" into something "highbrow," and what a wheeze that was. Mortifying.'

This desire to avoid a tone of smug pastiche led Jack to reject certain tropes that might be associated with the arched-brow frame of postmodernity. Although he himself had previously written 'sonnets that aren't quite sonnets, not quite rhyming or following meter,' with the sonnet form functioning 'as baggy clothes that a poem can slip on to lend it a little formality, like two children in a trenchcoat pretending to be an adult,' for this sequence, instead, my collaborator aimed 'to be absolutely meter-perfect, with no forced stresses, and for each rhyme to work totally.' The reasons behind this attempt were 'simple. While Stephanie and Ben had consented to be part of the television programme,' they had not consented to someone who did not personally know them 'writing in such an in-depth manner about their emotional journey, as real people.' In his close adherence to sonnet form, Jack therefore 'hoped that if the subjects of the poems were to read them, they might be heartened by the fact that in demonstrating at least a surface-level technical proficiency, the poet basically knew what he was doing.'

Jack also consistently followed the roughly Petrarchan rhyme scheme used in the sestet of my first sonnet about Ben, noting that 'diverging from the Shakespearean sonnet felt like a useful way to avoid gimmickry,' demonstrating that 'we weren't writing pastiche, but rather trying something in earnest, and making artistic choices at a small, technical level.' This conscious earnestness extended to Jack's use of visual imagery from the series:

It'd have felt disingenuous using images such as the 'cock balloon' that is bounced around on Stephanie's hen night, or the 'loo roll' she reports wrapping her Sindy doll in as a child to make her a bride, as fodder for an argument against institutions that Stephanie buys into; rather, I hope I present them as the television screen does — recording that they were there, that they mattered to somebody, and passing that on.

Nonetheless, this choice becomes a way to 'honour the reality' and the truthful lived experience of Jack's subject, Stephanie, rather than an endorsement of the production company's decisions which, narratively, 'prop up received notions of heterosexual, state-ordained monogamy as an ultimate goal — a not unpolitical act.' I shared Jack's desire to respond to both my focal character, Ben, and the programme 'with empathy, and write from a position of empathy' which would do each of them 'justice as a subject.' Though Jack didn't 'have much in common with Stephanie, seeing her earnestly express a wish to stop being lonely made me feel, quite totally, that she deserved the things she wanted.'

s03e02

Stephanie

Morning! Hotel bathrobes, hotel sunlight,
eating yoghurt off each other's faces,
growing old. Marriage is a playfight.
Mallorca and Majorca aren't two places,
and so they go to both. He butterknifes
the sunscreen on her back with his bare chest.
She bears the weight with care, for it's his wife's.
It's lovely. Overboard, the whitecaps crest
or crash. He sheds the skimpy vest she hates,
but tolerates, because hey look at him!!!
This is her husband, asking You okay?
before he plunges, crooked, blue, to swim
the distance that's between el el and jay.
He surfaces and calls. She watches, waits.

Ben

A dive-bomb into the uxorious!
The honeymoon is one long boat trip. Don't
these sangrias, this moonlit waterfront,
these sunset-orange trams look glorious?
This is a lonely planet. But there are guides:
we blunder through by touch first, skin on skin,
and then – *bonita. Mi mujer* – begin
to find the words to navigate the ride.
True, anyone can work in paradise.
Each sunscreened heart becomes an oily smear;
held breath still has to surface, even here.
Old heat diminishes; new's not new twice.
Am I up to love's bar, more class than crass?
I wanna be. I think I thought I was.

In practical terms, Jack and I composed the poems separately and episode-by-episode, meaning that we both only read each instalment of the other's person's work once our own for that episode was finished. (A qualification from Jack: 'I read your first one before writing mine, but then tried not to.') This approach felt, to my collaborator, like 'we wrote as TV watchers,' allowing us to 'expunge from the work any knowing foreshadowing' and instead to write about our subjects, not as 'a definitive, reflective statement on the series as a whole,' but by 'responding to their actions as presented in the show episode-by-episode':

I didn't want to know if they ended up happy or miserable. I didn't think we'd be able to write our first sonnets — accounts of the episode in which Ben and Stephanie get married — truthfully; I'd have been sneaking in foreboding glances and saying that his dinner jacket was the colour of an "unknown future," or some such dross. Ditto if I'd read all of your poems before or while I wrote mine — I'd unavoidably respond not just to the episode I'd watched but also to your work, and second-guess what your suppositions were, and try to tie things together nicely.

This self-imposed formal restriction — composing in a spirit of 'deliberate not-knowing' — meant our eight poems, which were already a departure from their early modern forebears in that the sequence emerged from two different subject positions, had the potential for polyglossic narrative fracture (this was not a 'single camera' sequence). But surprising elements of 'organic' unity also emerged: 'if an image was to be found in both mine and your poems,' Jack notes, 'then it must have been quite important to both of us.'

s03e03

Stephanie

Be gentle when you knock on your own door.
Dress up, go out, come in, kiss and unpack
bacon and beans in bed. Make sure you're sure
he's sure. Sing in the car. Keep him on track.
In Melton Mowbray, two Thai boxers clash,
one flags... your husband stands and whoops for joy.
You love his every tooth, tattoo, eyelash,
the body trained to weather and destroy
that he retreats inside, a silver ring
left on a bedside table before work.
You Skype a wobbling *Part of me's concerned*
and first-date on a boat that skims the murk.
He holds you while, below, the Thames is churned.
Oh, go on, do it, that titanic thing.

Ben

The art of eight limbs: marriage, meet Thai boxing.
Steph, meet the Midlands; bond with parents, friends.
Ben, meet your memories: old Brut, uncorking.
Emotions that erupt. Remember them?
Under the pyroclastic flow of heartbreak,
under the ash of love, he ducks and dives.
Lust is the undercard. Now it gets hard, mate.
Now it's TV protocol, framed snaps, shared lives,
and washing up. After the princess jag,
he's keeping the law at the length of one long arm,
fighting to shield his tenderest self from harm:
a shrill pink sausage hauled from a freezer-bag,

thrown in an early pan. Gloves on. Raised fists.
Send in the bio-anthropologists.

In assembling, collage-like, our ‘small collections of significant images,’ we still hoped to create poems that were not merely ekphrastic transcriptions, artefacts related to but distinct from the content and emphases of the TV series. For Jack, we were ‘actively adapting’ the show ‘into another form, allowing a space to criticise, celebrate, or at the very least, allow [its film-making choices] our focus and consideration.’ Concerned not to mock the biographical material we were appropriating, our creative critique perhaps came through most clearly in Jack’s muted hope that, in the process of adaptation, ‘the form of the poem perhaps afforded Stephanie more dignity than the form of the programme.’

Of course, in this Jack comes close to a trope we both understood as central to the Elizabethan models we were bearing in mind: the immortality topos, wherein ‘while love, the lover and beloved may all succumb to the passing of time, the writing will endure for ever,’ with the sonnet sequence becoming ‘a permanent record [...] in which the fame of all parties is guaranteed’ (Bates 2011, 114). Familiar from Shakespeare’s Sonnet 55 (‘Not marble nor the gilded monuments / Of princes shall outlive this powerful rhyme’) and dating back at least to Horace, whose boast Ezra Pound rendered — with Futurist vigour — ‘This monument will outlast metal and I made it,’ this motif sees the writer’s poetic skill and assiduity ‘preserve’ their (often rapidly-ageing) mortal subject (Shakespeare 2016; Horace 1964, 36-7). Whereas the beloved in Spenser’s *Amoretti* 75 scorns the ‘vain man’ who ‘dost in vain assay, / A mortal thing so to immortalize’ by writing her name upon the wave-washed ‘strand,’ (Braden 2005, 326) Jack expressed an equal, inverted suspicion towards the ‘murky notion’ that, in 2018,

in throwing the spotlight on a perhaps forgettable bit of telly, one is *immortalising* it, when in actuality putting something into a sonnet is probably a much less effective way of immortalising anything than filming it and putting it into a quite popular television programme.

Bates would probably, and justifiably, argue that our desire not to aim for immortality is simply one more self-negating parodic demurrer. That Ben and Stephanie might, in some sense, last longer as a couple in our poems than in their lives subsequent to the television show documenting their marriage, however, strikes me as a kind of muted victory for the human urge towards connection over and against our (justified) cynicism, and that of the programme makers. But without consciously claiming that our ‘verse [their] virtues rare shall eternize, / And in the heavens write’ their — or our — ‘glorious name[s],’ (Braden 2005, 326) Jack observes that we were nonetheless still as interested as any Elizabethan sonneteer in the interplay between the ephemeral experience of romantic love (here, four episodes’ worth of screened, curated images) and its archival residue, as filtered through our poetic work:

As time passes, these poems become increasingly unmoored as their subject matter becomes forgotten. If even in the quite near future readers happen to see them, they’ll find a series of clashing images representing a quite baffling media object. I hope these poems, if they’re doing anything, will provide a tiny, tiny reflection of a bit of telly — a very specific type, existing in a boom time for the medium but in no way

prestigious or well-regarded — and, almost by accident, a real person, who wanted to be loved.

s03e04

Ben

No one predicts this turn: a house in Clapham,
air full of wife, pink terry dressing-gown,
and fear of something that's already happened.
The kettle on, the timer counting down.
You can't just go to Portugal or Cyprus —
no, wait, you can. It's paradise regained!
Except, and that's the thing now, this is life, this,
it's all stress-spots and someone getting blamed.
A hundred and a million percent.
That's what his brother says — he even lifts —
she's took it with both hands, she plans, she's on it.
The question is: should you return a gift?
One team, one dream. What we said. What we meant.
Some turns can only happen in a sonnet.

Stephanie

In Cyprus, empty wine, *al fresco* crying.
Fucking hell. I miss you. I'm a dickhead.
Husband-in-the-dumps sipping, replying,
leaping from his darling like a sickbed.
She's dragging a sun-lounger with one arm.
She's hugging pals and sticking out her lip.
Her skin explodes in untexted alarm
until he reappears, a dazzle ship.
What if I don't want to give you a kiss?
They taxi to the wood-panelled room where
cod-science matched the two, with stats and force.
Politely, they are asked: Will you divorce?
They eye each other in the warm, still air.
Fast forward a few months: *I love him, yes.*

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