

## Chance, Choice and Calculation in the Process of “Getting Married”: A Reply to John R. Gillis and Richard Wall

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These two perceptive commentaries offer very different interpretations of the significance of the evidence presented in “Chance Encounters”. Crudely put, Richard Wall suggests that I have gone too far in placing chance, kinship and economic irrationality at the centre of my reconceptualization of marriage motivations. Individual calculation and economic motivation cannot be placed in the background of explanations of the individual or aggregate nuptiality experiences in an English context. By attempting to use autobiographical evidence to try and understand *both* the process of “getting married” and wider changes in marriage ages at the “national” level, I have written an article with two imperfectly related parts, and thus achieved neither end. Equally crudely put, John Gillis suggests that I have not gone far enough in my attempts at reinterpretation, and that I needed to talk more about the meaning of marriage ceremonies, contemporary understanding of the courtship process, and the role of Fortuna in the process of “getting married”. I shall consider all of these issues below. The one thing which unites the commentaries is a concern over sources, and it is apposite to use this question as a launch pad for restating and refining the analytical line opened in “Chance Encounters”.

That understanding the provenance of material appearing in autobiographical accounts and diaries is difficult cannot be denied. Nor is it easy to jump from the particular to the general when dealing with attitudes and motivations. Both commentators recognize the difficulties, and the clear implication of Richard Wall’s introduction is that I have overgeneralized “on the basis of limited evidence”. There are a number of potential responses to this viewpoint, even if we disregard the key question of the point at which the volume of autobiographical evidence becomes “enough” to be convincing. The data for “Chance Encounters” was not unsystematically collected. As footnote 19 pointed out, the evidence was assembled to obtain a particular perspective on northern industrial communities, and to obtain a perspective on the pre-1850 period. After 1850, as John Gillis has shown so well in this comment and in other work, the nature of the process of “getting married” and the significance that we can attach to the marriage event itself changes perceptibly.<sup>1</sup> I did not, and would not, suggest that the

1. J.R. Gillis, *A World of Their Own Making: Myth, Ritual and the Quest for Family Values* (Oxford, 1996), and idem, *For Better, For Worse: British Marriage, 1600 to the Present* (New York, 1985).

points raised in “Chance Encounters” apply seamlessly to the period after 1850, even if, as John Gillis suggests, issues of chance and irrationality are part and parcel of modern understandings of marriage. In this sense, much of the evidence deployed by Richard Wall, while valuable and well analysed, cannot throw light on the validity or not of the conclusions elaborated in “Chance Encounters”. Of course, I could have used more autobiographical testimony, but on key topics such as the role of relatives in supporting fledgling households, I chose to employ different sorts of data to try and balance the analysis. Much more evidence could have been reviewed, and for each piece of evidence cited by Richard Wall I could present a contrary piece of the same type. However, much of this will have to wait for the fuller study which John Gillis generously encourages.

Assuming that “Chance Encounters” is more than simply an overgeneralization, how do we make sense of a perspective which suggests that I have gone too far and one which suggests that I have not gone far enough? A brief recap of the central pillars of the article can help here. In “Chance Encounters” I tried to do two interrelated things. The first was to show that the process of “getting married” was a much more complex process than historical demographers have previously allowed, and that conventional explanations of this process, based upon concepts of the economically rational and the isolated individual, were unduly narrow. Using autobiographical and other evidence, I showed that chance, kinship, parents, reputation and a range of other factors remained important parts of the process of “getting married” even in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This was meant as a corrective to the vast bulk of literature on English historical demography, which has largely neglected these issues. The second thing which I tried to do was to use the lessons of autobiographical evidence to draw more general conclusions about why English marriage ages began to fall from the 1740s. I suggested that the key thing to explain was the decline of a late marrying group and the rise of an early marrying group. In other words, the process of “getting married” became, for some women, rather less elongated in the later eighteenth century than it had been before. And I contended that subtle changes in the way chance, kinship, friendship, reputation and other variables impacted on the process of “getting married” (particularly in terms of the number of times courtship was frustrated) could be used to explain at least part of this experience.<sup>2</sup> Here, then, lies the key to squaring the circle, for both John Gillis and Richard Wall are concentrating on one half of an argument that I portrayed as a whole. Richard Wall

2. Richard Wall’s assertion is that I could have made these contentions without using textual evidence of the sort which underpins “Chance Encounters”. However, it is abundantly clear that understanding English nuptiality in a statistical sense is in large part a function of understanding the process of getting married and, as John Gillis points out, of understanding the significance which contemporaries attached to this process. In this task, autobiographical and other textual material provides the key to a new way of approaching nuptiality in the English context.

considers chiefly the relationship between “getting married” and aggregate indicators of nuptiality, while John Gillis considers the complexities of “getting married” in their own right. In this sense, both offer very valuable perspectives.

John Gillis summarizes and elaborates my arguments in an enviable and eloquent way. As he suggests, I certainly do believe that “it took a community to make a marriage”, and acknowledge freely that this is a point which has been consistently made by John Gillis himself, and a range of other commentators, in the past.<sup>3</sup> The novelty of “Chance Encounters”, as I implied above, lay in its elaboration of the lessons which can be learnt from autobiographies, and in the attempt to move from the particular to the general in explaining the course of marriage ages in early modern England. Against this backdrop, John Gillis is certainly correct to suggest that a wider discussion of the language of marriage and of contemporary understandings of the process of “getting married”, would have added to the analysis. In terms of language, it is clear that the term “marriage” could have a variety of definitions at the level of the community.<sup>4</sup> The eighteenth-century West Yorkshire textile townships of Calverley and Sowerby, for instance, saw one-fifth of the marriages of those in the poorest or marginal social groups lacking legal status.<sup>5</sup> Such imprecise terminology complicates the quantification of nuptiality, as John Gillis suggests. It also throws the complexity of the “union decision” into sharp relief, and highlights the narrowness of perspectives which rely on economic factors to understand demographic decision-making. An appreciation of contemporary understandings of the process of “getting married” points in the same direction. John Gillis suggests that had I explored this issue I would have been better able to appreciate the symbolism behind the marriage event, and contemporary perceptions that marriage was largely a process which happened rather than one which could be controlled. Such points are very valuable, and were the logical extension of the arguments deployed in “Chance Encounters” given more space and time. Arguably, the later eighteenth century marks the onset of a new era of risk and uncertainty in the lives of large swathes of ordinary people. Against this backdrop, the “culture of chance” may have outstripped the paper choices which faced people in the process of “getting married”. Economic influences on this process have their place, but the autobiographical evidence deployed in “Chance Encounters” suggests that they should not be placed at centre stage. John Gillis has

3. Gillis, *For Better, For Worse*, and K. Wrightson, *English Society 1580–1640* (London, 1982).

4. J.R. Gillis, “Conjugal Settlements: Resort to Clandestine and Common Law Marriage in England and Wales, 1650–1850”, in J. Bossy (ed.), *Disputes and Settlements: Law and Human Relations in the West* (Cambridge, 1983). See also R.B. Outhwaite, *Clandestine Marriage in England 1500–1850* (London, 1995).

5. See P. Hudson and S.A. King, “Two Textile Townships: A Comparative Demographic Analysis” (forthcoming).

proposed a valuable agenda for future discussion of the cultural determinants of the process of “getting married” and this is to be welcomed.

Meanwhile, it is the way in which I draw lessons from autobiographical material, and then relate autobiographical and other evidence to explanations of falling female marriage ages in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, which is central to Richard Wall’s commentary. As we have seen, he contends that I have gone too far in questioning economic influences on the process of “getting married” and that I have erroneously applied evidence from textual data to try and speculate on why English marriage ages fell. In addition, I have neglected evidence that could have put a different gloss on my findings. The latter charge has already been answered. I did not use Le Play and other evidence quoted by Richard Wall because I am convinced by the work of John Gillis and a reading of autobiographical evidence for the later nineteenth century that the nature of the process of “getting married” changes after 1850. In any case the number of English cases reported by Le Play, or indeed the number of people reported in the Corfe census, do not really provide an improvement on my autobiographical and other evidence in terms of tendencies to “over-generalize on the basis of limited evidence”.

Richard Wall’s attempt to downplay the lessons of autobiographical material, and to limit the extent to which we can generalize from it, is a well-constructed analysis. However, each of his four central points can themselves be subject to reinterpretation. First, the role of economic influences in the process of “getting married”. The Le Play material which Richard Wall uses certainly does show that in the small number of English cases young couples would have contributed some of their own resources to the marriage event, alongside those contributed by their relatives. This role for individual accumulation may have generated a link between marriage and general economic conditions. In fact, I never denied that basic economics had a role to play in the process of “getting married”. Rather, the autobiographical evidence deployed in “Chance Encounters” showed three important things. First, that the process of “getting married” was often a very long one, such that the wax and wane of the economic situation may not have been as central as historical demographers often assume. Second, that issues of accumulation, current economic situation and future outlook could be shelved in the face of other attractions. Most of the people appearing in my autobiographical evidence did not marry when it was economically rational for them to do so. Indeed, many of them appear to have married on the whim, without any balancing of economic situation and prospects, and in the micawberish hope that something would turn up.<sup>6</sup> Third, that the pro-

6. Of course, as Richard Wall suggests, my analysis understated the fact that youth, strength and skill could be part and parcel of the resources necessary for household formation. This was a valuable point which I should have thought out more fully.

cess of “getting married” could be brought to a successful conclusion where the young couple did not have two pennies to rub together, with the intervention of relatives, but that this outcome was less likely if the couple had to rely on their own resources in isolation. Relatives might provide financial or emotional support, or they might be instrumental in bringing and keeping couples together in the courtship process. In this sense my conception of “resources” is rather wider than that employed by Richard Wall. In turn, the link between economic experiences and potential, and marriage, are not at all clear in this situation, and the wider question of what level of resources was necessary to bring courtship to a successful conclusion, remains.

A second bone of contention, and one related to the question of how far economics shaped the marriage decision, lies in the issue of whether women had a choice in the marriage arena. Richard Wall’s data for Corfe Castle show that single women in the age group 35–44 were unable to exist as independent entities, and he suggests that there may have been an economic imperative for women to marry given the spectre of this fate. The conclusion that women had no prospect of long-term economic viability on their own is absolutely right, though elsewhere I have suggested that the role of the poor law in terms of the percentage of average income provided to different social groups was subject to wide regional fluctuations.<sup>7</sup> However, Richard Wall’s characterization of my ideas on the question of whether women did or did not have choice in the process of “getting married” is based upon a misinterpretation of the point which “Chance Encounters” was making. I did not challenge the conclusions of Bridget Hill, and nor did I suggest that questions over economic situation had no place in the world view of eighteenth-century women. The case which Bridget Hill advances, and which Richard Wall exemplifies, seems to me proven beyond doubt. For eighteenth-century women looking into the future, poverty-stricken singleness would have been no more attractive than it is today. There would come a point at which this would be the imperative behind the search for a marriage partner. What we have to ask ourselves is at what age being single became a “problem” in contemporary perceptions. If in their early twenties women were worried about a future in their thirties and forties where being single would consign them to the bottom of the economic and social heap, then the economic imperative to find a marriage partner may be as important as Richard Wall suggests. But if the prospect of singleness only became a problem in the eyes of contemporary women in their late twenties, then this explanatory thread lacks real power. By the later eighteenth century even the top percentile of the female marrying group were marrying in their early thirties, and I find it inconceivable that the early marrying group which emerged in England at the same time were motivated by a fear of

7. S.A. King, *Poverty and Welfare in Industrialising England* (Manchester, forthcoming 1999), chs 5–8.

being economically marginalized 10–15 years on if they did not marry. This view is part and parcel of my conclusion that economics must not be consigned to the scrap heap, but must be pushed from the centre stage position that it has held for so long.

The third pillar of Richard Wall's argument is a scepticism of my attempt to move from individual narrative testimony to drawing conclusions about how we might reinterpret the falling marriage age in England during the eighteenth century. In "Chance Encounters" I suggested that autobiographical and other material had highlighted the positive and negative role of family, kin and friends or neighbours in the process of getting married. I went on to suggest that in the uncertain atmosphere of late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England, the potential for acquiring substantial resources prior to marriage at the individual level became increasingly constricted. Examples of the very poor ability of young people in early modern England to save during this period abound. Against this backdrop, one of the reasons for falling age at marriage may have been increasingly dense and increasingly functional (in terms of material resources, timely interventions and emotional support) family, kinship and neighbourhood networks.

This was, of course, speculation, and Richard Wall was right to lay down an alternative picture. He suggests two caveats. First, that kinship networks in particular were not always dense and that their density did not change over long periods of time. His data show clearly that in Buckinghamshire and Nottinghamshire in 1831 and 1846 respectively, residential propinquity was roughly in line with the figures for a century later. This I accept fully, and it is good to see this data. However, Richard Wall simplifies my point rather too much. The fact that up to one half of all sons were resident within the same parish as their parents or in otherwise close proximity at the very end of the period in which I was interested, I find very significant. How had this picture changed over time? More importantly, a major lesson which springs from autobiographical evidence is that kinship involvement often took the form of the intervention of people who were not parents. Brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, step-parents, relatives-in-law, can all be shown to be part and parcel of the process of "getting married". Richard Wall is right to say that we cannot make definitive statements yet, but for four parishes on which I have worked recently, Table 1 traces kinship propinquity using all kinship links rather than just parent-child relationships. There is clear support here for the idea that kinship becomes more dense over time. Richard Wall's second caveat centres on my argument that kinship and other networks became more functional to the marriage process over time, irrespective of whether they also became more dense. He uses the writing of Flora Thompson to look at the functionality of kinship and neighbourhood in a table which ought to provide a schema for looking at these issues in the future. It emerges that kinship and other relationships were often characterized as much by tension as mutual aid, that the degree

of aid which could be offered was usually small-scale, and that this mutual aid was often divorced from the process of “getting married”. There is certainly something in this material, though it stands way outside the period which I was addressing in “Chance Encounters”. However, Richard Wall fails to address a secondary literature from Anderson, Cooper and Donald, and others which points in entirely the opposite direction. He also works on the basis that I was trying to create a universal law. In fact, what I was trying to do was to suggest that external stimuli to the process of “getting married” could have been instrumental in the disappearance of a late marrying group and the emergence of an early marrying group in the eighteenth century. I was interested in the changing experiences of perhaps one quarter of the marrying group, rather than the stable experiences of the majority. Within this framework, “Chance Encounters” gave a number of examples of positive and substantial help. These examples were exemplary rather than exhaustive.<sup>8</sup>

Table 1. *Kinship densities in four English townships*

Place	1700–1749		1750–1799	
	Related to none (%)	Related to 2+	Related to none	Related to 2+
Calverley	26	38	18	48
Sowerby	40	32	32	41
Paxton	53	12	40	26
Lyndhurst	59	8	44	31

Source: King, *Poverty and Welfare in Industrialising England*.

Finally, I argued in “Chance Encounters” that the process of “getting married” could be artificially elongated by a number of failed courtships. These were the outcome of rigidities in the process of “getting married”, and I suggested that a decline in the power of some of these rigidities during the eighteenth century might help to explain falling marriage ages. Richard Wall addresses the rigidity of “reputation”, concluding that in London at the end of the period with which I was concerned, mobility was so ubiquitous as to mean that reputations could be manufactured and abandoned with relative ease. A decline in the potential of a discovered reputation to elongate the process of “getting married” thus cannot help to explain falling marriage ages in the aggregate. The data for London are welcome, and I was not aware of it. However, we might equally argue that London was representative of nowhere in particular at any point in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Its pulling power, its expulsion power, its economic function, and the nature of its urban geography made London a unique place. Much more relevant for a discussion of rigidities in the urban marriage market (a feature

8. For many other examples, see *ibid.*, chs 4–6.

which I certainly underplayed in “Chance Encounters”) would be a discussion of the situation in Manchester, Liverpool, Sheffield, Bolton, Preston, or even in smaller market and manufacturing towns. In these places, contemporary evidence that the concept of the neighbourhood and district were very strong indeed is voluminous. So, while the mobility circuit centred on London might take people to the seaside or to Cornwall, movers in Bolton, Liverpool, Calverley or Clitheroe would usually shift within a district or set of streets. Reputation in this sense was more difficult to leave behind, and this bolsters my point in “Chance Encounters” that reputations became more transparent in the eighteenth century than they had been before, contributing to a contraction of the length of the process of “getting married”. It seems to me that Richard Wall’s evidence does not tarnish this basic contention.

The central questions raised by “Chance Encounters” still stand. What level of resources (broadly defined) was necessary to bring the process of “getting married” to a successful conclusion? What role did kin play in this process, and how did this change over time? What were the rigidities in the process of “getting married”, and how did things like urbanization and the expansion of poor relief affect the power of these rigidities over time? In the eyes of young couples, did eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England look like an increasingly risky place where economic prospects had little relevance to lived experience? If so, how did this affect the process of marriage? What role is there for chance events in the process of “getting married”? What was it that led to a contraction of the process of “getting married” in the eighteenth century, and to the emergence of an early marrying group at the expense of a late marrying group? I have suggested ways in which narrative evidence can begin to answer questions such as these, and in doing so have suggested that the mean age at marriage is part and parcel of the problem of reconceptualizing nuptiality in the English context. John Gillis has taken the analysis a step further, suggesting that we need to rediscover the symbolism of marriage, and contemporary understandings of the process of getting married, before we can start talking about statistical abstractions of “marriage”. We both suggest that chance comes to play an increasingly important part in the consciousness of youth and in the practicalities of getting married. Richard Wall’s commentary offers some useful additional data, but does not successfully challenge the essence of “Chance Encounters”. With more work in the future, perhaps we may yet see “Fortuna” restored to a rightful place in history.