

## Marriage - Poem by Marianne Moore

This institution,  
perhaps one should say enterprise  
out of respect for which  
one says one need not change one's mind  
about a thing one has believed in,  
requiring public promises  
of one's intention  
to fulfill a private obligation:  
I wonder what Adam and Eve  
think of it by this time,  
this firegilt steel  
alive with goldenness;  
how bright it shows --  
"of circular traditions and impostures,  
committing many spoils,"  
requiring all one's criminal ingenuity  
to avoid!  
Psychology which explains everything  
explains nothing  
and we are still in doubt.  
Eve: beautiful woman --  
I have seen her  
when she was so handsome  
she gave me a start,  
able to write simultaneously  
in three languages --  
English, German and French  
and talk in the meantime;  
equally positive in demanding a commotion  
and in stipulating quiet:  
"I should like to be alone;"  
to which the visitor replies,  
"I should like to be alone;  
why not be alone together?"  
Below the incandescent stars  
below the incandescent fruit,  
the strange experience of beauty;  
its existence is too much;  
it tears one to pieces  
and each fresh wave of consciousness  
is poison.  
"See her, see her in this common world,"  
the central flaw  
in that first crystal-fine experiment,  
this amalgamation which can never be more  
than an interesting possibility,  
describing it

as "that strange paradise  
unlike flesh, gold, or stately buildings,  
the choicest piece of my life:  
the heart rising  
in its estate of peace  
as a boat rises  
with the rising of the water;"  
constrained in speaking of the serpent --  
that shed snakeskin in the history of politeness  
not to be returned to again --  
that invaluable accident  
exonerating Adam.  
And he has beauty also;  
it's distressing -- the O thou  
to whom, from whom,  
without whom nothing -- Adam;  
"something feline,  
something colubrine" -- how true!  
a crouching mythological monster  
in that Persian miniature of emerald mines,  
raw silk -- ivory white, snow white,  
oyster white and six others --  
that paddock full of leopards and giraffes --  
long lemonyellow bodies  
sown with trapezoids of blue.  
Alive with words,  
vibrating like a cymbal  
touched before it has been struck,  
he has prophesied correctly --  
the industrious waterfall,  
"the speedy stream  
which violently bears all before it,  
at one time silent as the air  
and now as powerful as the wind."  
"Treading chasms  
on the uncertain footing of a spear,"  
forgetting that there is in woman  
a quality of mind  
which is an instinctive manifestation  
is unsafe,  
he goes on speaking  
in a formal, customary strain  
of "past states," the present state,  
seals, promises,  
the evil one suffered,  
the good one enjoys,  
hell, heaven,  
everything convenient  
to promote one's joy."  
There is in him a state of mind

by force of which,  
perceiving what it was not  
intended that he should,  
"he experiences a solemn joy  
in seeing that he has become an idol."  
Plagued by the nightingale  
in the new leaves,  
with its silence --  
not its silence but its silences,  
he says of it:  
"It clothes me with a shirt of fire."  
"He dares not clap his hands  
to make it go on  
lest it should fly off;  
if he does nothing, it will sleep;  
if he cries out, it will not understand."  
Unnerved by the nightingale  
and dazzled by the apple,  
impelled by "the illusion of a fire  
effectual to extinguish fire,"  
compared with which  
the shining of the earth  
is but deformity -- a fire  
"as high as deep as bright as broad  
as long as life itself,"  
he stumbles over marriage,  
"a very trivial object indeed"  
to have destroyed the attitude  
in which he stood --  
the ease of the philosopher  
unfathered by a woman.  
Unhelpful Hymen!  
"a kind of overgrown cupid"  
reduced to insignificance  
by the mechanical advertising  
parading as involuntary comment,  
by that experiment of Adam's  
with ways out but no way in --  
the ritual of marriage,  
augmenting all its lavishness;  
its fiddle-head ferns,  
lotus flowers, opuntias, white dromedaries,  
its hippopotamus --  
nose and mouth combined  
in one magnificent hopper,  
"the crested screamer --  
that huge bird almost a lizard,"  
its snake and the potent apple.  
He tells us  
that "for love

that will gaze an eagle blind,  
that is like a Hercules  
climbing the trees  
in the garden of the Hesperides,  
from forty-five to seventy  
is the best age,"  
commending it  
as a fine art, as an experiment,  
a duty or as merely recreation.  
One must not call him ruffian  
nor friction a calamity --  
the fight to be affectionate:  
"no truth can be fully known  
until it has been tried  
by the tooth of disputation."  
The blue panther with black eyes,  
the basalt panther with blue eyes,  
entirely graceful --  
one must give them the path --  
the black obsidian Diana  
who "darkeneth her countenance  
as a bear doth,  
causing her husband to sigh,"  
the spiked hand  
that has an affection for one  
and proves it to the bone,  
impatient to assure you  
that impatience is the mark of independence  
not of bondage.  
"Married people often look that way" --  
"seldom and cold, up and down,  
mixed and malarial  
with a good day and bad."  
"When do we feed?"  
We occidentals are so unemotional,  
we quarrel as we feed;  
one's self is quite lost,  
the irony preserved  
in "the Ahasuerus tête à tête banquet"  
with its "good monster, lead the way,"  
with little laughter  
and munificence of humor  
in that quixotic atmosphere of frankness  
in which "Four o'clock does not exist  
but at five o'clock  
the ladies in their imperious humility  
are ready to receive you";  
in which experience attests  
that men have power  
and sometimes one is made to feel it.

He says, "what monarch would not blush  
to have a wife  
with hair like a shaving-brush?  
The fact of woman  
is not `the sound of the flute  
but every poison."  
She says, "'Men are monopolists  
of stars, garters, buttons  
and other shining baubles' --  
unfit to be the guardians  
of another person's happiness."  
He says, "These mummies  
must be handled carefully --  
`the crumbs from a lion's meal,  
a couple of shins and the bit of an ear';  
turn to the letter M  
and you will find  
that `a wife is a coffin,'  
that severe object  
with the pleasing geometry  
stipulating space and not people,  
refusing to be buried  
and uniquely disappointing,  
revengefully wrought in the attitude  
of an adoring child  
to a distinguished parent."  
She says, "This butterfly,  
this waterfly, this nomad  
that has `proposed  
to settle on my hand for life.' --  
What can one do with it?  
There must have been more time  
in Shakespeare's day  
to sit and watch a play.  
You know so many artists are fools."  
He says, "You know so many fools  
who are not artists."  
The fact forgot  
that "some have merely rights  
while some have obligations,"  
he loves himself so much,  
he can permit himself  
no rival in that love.  
She loves herself so much,  
she cannot see herself enough --  
a statuette of ivory on ivory,  
the logical last touch  
to an expansive splendor  
earned as wages for work done:  
one is not rich but poor

when one can always seem so right.  
What can one do for them --  
these savages  
condemned to disaffect  
all those who are not visionaries  
alert to undertake the silly task  
of making people noble?  
This model of petrine fidelity  
who "leaves her peaceful husband  
only because she has seen enough of him" --  
that orator reminding you,  
"I am yours to command."  
"Everything to do with love is mystery;  
it is more than a day's work  
to investigate this science."  
One sees that it is rare --  
that striking grasp of opposites  
opposed each to the other, not to unity,  
which in cycloid inclusiveness  
has dwarfed the demonstration  
of Columbus with the egg --  
a triumph of simplicity --  
that charitive Euroclydon  
of frightening disinterestedness  
which the world hates,  
admitting:

"I am such a cow,  
if I had a sorrow,  
I should feel it a long time;  
I am not one of those  
who have a great sorrow  
in the morning  
and a great joy at noon;"  
which says: "I have encountered it  
among those unpretentious  
protégés of wisdom,  
where seeming to parade  
as the debater and the Roman,  
the statesmanship  
of an archaic Daniel Webster  
persists to their simplicity of temper  
as the essence of the matter:  
'Liberty and union  
now and forever;'

the book on the writing-table;  
the hand in the breast-pocket."