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"THE TOOTH OF DISPUTATION": MARIANNE MOORE’S “MARRIAGE”*

The brilliance of the rose, Moore writes in her early poem “Roses Only,” does not result from its petals alone; its thorns that guard against the “predatory hand” are even more essential manifestations of brilliance. “Your thorns,” the poem concludes, “are the best part of you.” Moore’s own thorns stand out most brilliantly and prick most sharply in her early works. *Poems* (1921) and *Observations* (1924) contain numerous lyrics in which, with sarcasm and wit, Moore jabs those who might threaten her own rose-like “self-dependen[cy].” A number of these poems--such as “To Statecraft Embalmed,” “Pedantic Literalist,” “Those Various Scalpels,” “To a Steam Roller,” “Critics and Connoisseurs,” “To Military Progress”—are addressed boldly to the offending party and thus suggest a sharp exchange, but the one addressed does not respond. Moore comes closest to allowing refutation in “To Statecraft Embalmed,” where she presents a kind of pseudo-dialogue: she asks her ibis-diplomat, “shall Justice’ faint zigzag inscription . . . / show / the pulse of its once vivid sovereignty?” and then speaks for him or her: “You say not, and transmigrating from the / sarcophagus, you wind / snow / silence round us and with moribund talk, / half limping and half-ladyfied, you stalk / about.” Such a recounting of her antagonist’s behavior hardly encourages the reader to entertain the bird’s views. These early witty poems are, then, monologues, not dialogues, in which Moore asserts her emphatic judgments.

“Marriage” (1923), too, reveals Moore’s thorny brilliance, and its opening lines suggest that it will fit the decisive mode so frequently encountered in her early work. With the ironies of those famous lines beginning “This

* We would like to thank the Rosenbach Museum and Library and Clive Driver, Literary Executor of Marianne Moore’s estate, for permission to quote from correspondence and manuscripts in the Moore archive.
institution, / perhaps one should say enterprise . . . ” Moore denounces this “thing” that ridiculously demands “public promises” for “a private obligation,” a “thing” so interwoven with the social fabric that one who wishes to avoid it must resort to “criminal” strategies. But this poem differs fundamentally from her other poems of mocking dismissal, and not merely in drawing also on Moore’s less blatantly polemical, more meditative modes.

“Marriage” is unique in containing an extended dramatic dialogue in which the poem’s characters argue with each other as Moore’s voice temporarily recedes. This open conflict between dramatized speakers, moreover, hints at an uncharacteristic conflict in Moore’s feelings toward her subject—as do other less unusual features of the poem. The poet’s deep ambivalence about the “enterprise” of marriage reveals itself in the poem’s tortuous intellectual movement and in its contradictory tones reinforced by her incorporation of quoted voices as diverse as those of the contemporary feminist M. Carey Thomas and the seventeenth-century divine Richard Baxter. “Marriage,” then, contains at least two kinds of debate or “disputation”—Moore’s word for the arguments of the poem: one, the dramatized and primarily rhetorical exchange of her stylized characters, and two, the troubled but quieter argument Moore carries on with herself about the virtues and dangers of this relationship.¹

In what follows, we shall focus on the disputational aspects of the poem as crucial to illuminating not only Moore’s passionately mixed feelings on the subject of marriage but also the structure of this particularly obscure work. From this focus we hope a fuller understanding of disputation as a central value of her poetry will emerge.² Moore’s internal argument about marriage,

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1. At the poem’s opening, marriage is considered more as a social institution than as a personal relationship. Although Moore focuses on the interaction of individuals throughout much of the poem and although “love” serves as a near synonym for “marriage” late in the poem, the social (patricianal) context of a married couple’s relationship always colors Moore’s presentation. Similarly, we intend our references to marriage as a “relationship” to denote the relationship as it is shaped by its sociocultural context.

2. Although no other critics have focussed so directly on internal argument in their analysis of a Moore poem or distinguished types of argumentation as important to a poem’s subject or structure, other critics have noted Moore’s use of contradictory positions generally, and ambivalence in her attitude toward marriage in this poem particularly. Among recent critics of Moore, Harold Bloom sees poignant comedy in “Marriage,” Pamela White Hadam sees Moore’s fear of the inseparability of beauty (or love) from danger in this poem. Taffy Martin notes that “Marriage” and “An Octopus” “illuminate some of Moore’s personal complexity” in demonstrating “multiple perspective, unresolvable contradiction” (p. 21), and Grace Schulman finds that argumentative structure or inner debate characterizes much of Moore’s early poetry, although she does not discuss “Marriage” in these terms.
evident in her personal correspondence and private notebooks leading up to the poem's composition, appears most clearly in the poem's rapidly shifting perspectives. The changing voices and attitudes establish expansive "discursive boundaries" (de Lauretis 4-5) within which Moore explores her subject. Entertaining widely divergent views of marriage simultaneously or in rapid succession enables Moore, and the reader, ultimately to abandon the desire for a single unqualified stance. We contend, moreover, that Moore's dramatization in "Marriage" of several kinds of disputation allows her to enact her fundamental belief that "no truth can be fully known / until it has been tried / by the tooth of disputation." While "Marriage" is anomalous in its explicit invocation and dramatization of argument, a belief in the value of "disputation" tacitly shapes much of Moore's poetic oeuvre. Thus, in the course of this important poem, Moore clarifies for the reader that her internal disputation is not simply evidence of ambivalence or vacillation; it is the model she proposes for the exploration of any truth.

The notable difficulty of "Marriage" derives originally from the degree of turmoil and contradiction in Moore's attitudes toward this particular subject. In some of her other poems, her stance is so complex that she must introduce a great many qualifications and tangents in order to define it properly; but most often the stance itself is resolute and passionately adhered to. "Marriage" stands apart in the degree of inner conflict it contains. For though she had by this time chosen the socially "criminal" stance of one who avoids marriage, and though she was highly critical of marriage as commonly practiced, Moore nonetheless maintained a vision of marriage as an ideal in human relations. Her profound investment in this subject was in part an outgrowth of personal events: Scofield Thayer's courtship of Moore, and Bryher's marriage to Robert McAlmon.

3. It is widely believed that Thayer proposed to Moore, but while that event seems probable, we have found no documentation to support it as fact. Williams asserts that "Scofield Thayer, so the rumor ran, had proposed to Marianne Moore who had begged off, though continuing to work at the Dial office" (163-164). Margaret Newlin speculates that Thayer proposed to Moore and that Moore gave him at least ambivalent encouragement, although Newlin reiterates that she has no direct evidence for either Thayer's proposal or Moore's feelings. It is also possible that this often repeated rumor of Thayer's proposal to Moore has been sustained by the desire of a predominantly heterosexual culture to assimilate unmarried people more closely to its norms.

4. In addition to these immediate stimuli, Moore's limited first-hand knowledge of marriage probably contributed to her curiosity and perplexity. Not only did she never marry, but she never lived for an extended period with a two-parent family or with a
Moore's involvement in her friend's union is documented in her exchange of letters with HD, Bryher, and McAlmon in the spring and summer of 1921, one year before she began working on the poem "Marriage" in her poetry workbook and two years before the publication of the poem. That correspondence reveals that Moore is upset by her friend's marriage, partly because of her attachment to Bryher and partly because of her essentially feminist reservations about the consequences of marriage for any woman, especially for an artist. Thus, when McAlmon writes in a self-aggrandizing way that he has saved Bryher from the "oppressive environment" of British socialization of women, and elaborates his desire that the partners in marriage, "when they possess ability, [be] known as individuals, rather than having the woman known[s] [sic.] as a Mrs. _________," Moore deflates his pretensions to protective generosity: "Apropos of freedom in your last letter: I think it is very nice of you to accord a woman as much freedom as she might care to have but I think a woman's keeping her own name seems like clutching at the last straw of self-identification" (letters from and to McAlmon, April 12 and June 18, 1921; V:40:06 Rosenbach Museum and Library). Such feminist concern is to some extent inseparable from Moore's possessive regard for Bryher. Moore, for example, considers herself a better judge of Bryher's needs than McAlmon is, fearing that he has done Bryher an "irreparable injury"; while Moore finds marriage inevitably risky ("There is no such thing as a prudent marriage," she writes. "Marriage is a Crusade; there is always tragedy in it"), "in the case of one with so finely adjusted a mechanism as Bryher, one's spiritual motive power is sure to receive a backset" (letter to H.D., March 27, 1921; V:23:32, Rosenbach).

Yet there are contradictions even in these letters. At the same time that Moore questions the appropriateness of marriage at all for someone like Bryher, she also condemns McAlmon for not pursuing marriage in a more conventional way. She deplores the haste of the marriage; voices a belief (by repeating her mother's sentiments) that McAlmon "ought to have seen Bryher's parents before being married"; and depicts herself as "shocked" and "outrage[d]" that he could give his marriage to Bryher "so unromantic a treatment" (to McAlmon, March 30, father-figure at all--first because of the nervous break-down and institutionalization of her father, whom she never knew, and then because of the death of her maternal grandfather in 1894.
1921; V:40:06, Rosenbach). Even about the marriage contract she has mixed feelings. On the one hand, if “we do away with the marriage contract. . . we get back to cave life.” On the other hand, she complains that “the whole canker in the situation” is that “people who have no respect for marriage, insist on the respectability of a marriage contract.” At one point she flatly states, “I don’t like divorce and marriage is difficult but marriage is our attempt to solve a problem and I can’t think of anything better” (to Bryher, August 31, 1921; V:08:06, Rosenbach). The letters, like the poem “Marriage,” reveal deeply mixed feelings about this relationship and institution: Moore objects to marriage as potentially oppressive to women; she is aware of its immense practical difficulties; and yet she sometimes upholds a vision of it that is idealized and romantic.

Not surprisingly, Moore’s earliest workings on the poem also suggest ambivalence. In her poetry workbook, probably around March 1922, she wrote under the heading Marriage:  

I don’t know what Adam and Eve think of it by this time

I don’t think much of it (VII:04:04 Rosenbach)

These lines recall the opening she retained for “Poetry”—“I too dislike it.” In that poem, the rhetorical strategy of baldly announcing her dislike allows her to explore as well the attributes and powers of poetry that she admires. Moore’s play with a similar opening statement in the “Marriage” workbook indicates her comparable complexity of feeling about this subject: her sharp criticism of the failure of marriage reflects her high standard for the “institution.” In the published versions of “Marriage,” instead of repeating the opening strategy of “Poetry,” Moore reveals the divisions within her thinking by creating an extremely disjunctive structure in which perspectives and voices shift rapidly.

As published, the poem opens with a sharply humorous definition of marriage reminiscent of her other satirical poems.  

This institution...
I wonder what Adam and Eve think of it by this time,

5. Moore pencilled “March 18” into the margin of page 6 of this workbook, and former Rosenbach curator Patricia C. Willis estimates that 1922 is the earliest year the poet could have been working on the poem (private conversation with Miller).

6. “Marriage” is not among the poems that Moore revised much. The first printing in Mankin (Volume 3, 1923), however, differs from the familiar version in a few phrases, does not include the notes, and includes about eight lines that Moore subsequently cut.
this fire-gilt steel
alive with goldenness;
how bright it shows--
'of circular traditions and impostsures,
committing many spoils,
requiring all one's criminal ingenuity
to avoid!

Yet Moore's wry questioning of "what Adam and Eve / think of it" is followed by her serious admission that even the contemporary science of relationships "Psychology ... explains nothing," and "we"--herself, and perhaps moderns generally--"are still in doubt." To flesh out her doubts in the poem, she creates portraits of a woman and man who represent socialized gender as much as figures of biblical or historical reference. At the beginning of the poem, Moore calls them Eve and Adam to evoke prelapsarian possibilities of union as well as to anticipate their fall, in which each succumbs to self-love and becomes bitterly disillusioned with marriage. Throughout the poem, Eve and Adam, or She and He, combine aspects of the modern individual and of ancient archetype. Moore begins by depicting Eve in the first person: "Eve: beautiful woman-- / I have seen her ..." This representative woman is clever, talented, gifted with language, and independent in asserting her own desires. Yet Moore's Eve romantically envisions the first marriage in Eden, "that first crystal-fine experiment," as "'the choicest piece of my life: / the heart rising / in its estate of peace / as a boat rises / with the rising of the water.'" Moore's portrait of Eve is flattering. Correspondingly, the patriarchal story of the Fall, in which Eve is "the central flaw" of Eden, receives mocking treatment; her act is "that invaluable accident / exonerating Adam."

Adam "has beauty also" but Moore depicts him less positively and from a greater distance (she does not "see" him). Some of his attributes are even Satanic: he is snakelike ("'something colubrine'"), "a crouching mythological monster" conscious of and pleased with his own power. In a similar departure from popular stereotypes, Moore stresses Eve's as well as Adam's facility with language, although she notes significant differences in their modes of verbal control. Eve's capacity with language is extravagant, even to the point of freakishness; she is "able to write simultaneously / in three languages ... and talk in the meantime." Yet despite her multi-lingual fluency, she is "constrained in speaking of the serpent," or of her own
history. Moore portrays Adam as the one whose vitality depends on language: he is “Alive with words, / vibrating like a cymbal / touched before it has been struck.” In contrast to Eve, his only problem with language seems to be that he “goes on speaking” without end. Moreover, only he converts his control of words into power. He “prophesie[s] correctly” the force of patriarchy--“which violently bears all before it”--and his pronouncements in a “formal customary strain” establish the conventional dichotomous categories of Western culture:

...‘past states, the present state,
seals, promises,
the evil one suffered,
the good one enjoys,
hell, heaven...’

Moore highlights the self-serving pomposity of Adam’s pronouncements on the foundations of history and morality in the summarizing phrase--“‘everything convenient / to promote one’s joy.’” As her irony suggests, the “one” Adam looks out for is probably himself; his categories justify the arrangements that make it possible for him to “experienc[e] a solemn joy” in becoming “an idol.”

Rather than enjoying a tranquil paradisal vision of union, as Eve does, Adam is “plagued by the nightingale” that apparently represents both the woman and his own sexuality. Furthermore, his ideal vision of a fire “‘as long as life itself?’ “compared with which / the shining of the earth / is but deformity,” although parallel to Eve’s vision, stands in elemental opposition to “the heart rising” like a boat on water. The contrast between his metaphor for their union as consuming fire and hers as peaceful water foreshadows the differences that lead the man and the woman into verbal battle later in the poem. Seeking that union lyrically envisioned as “‘a fire / effectual to extinguish fire’”--seeking, that is, an experience of passion sufficient to satisfy his sexual desire--Adam instead “stumbles over marriage.” In this extension of her earlier mockery of the patriarchal myth of paradise, Moore presents marriage in a context that calls attention to Adam’s delusive self-satisfaction; marriage is “‘a very trivial object indeed’ / to have destroyed the attitude / in which he stood-- / the ease of the philosopher / unfathered by a woman.”

With the introduction of the word marriage (“he stumbles over marriage”), Moore concludes her initial presentation of Eve and Adam. At this point in the shifting tones and perspectives of the poem, Moore has already
introduced her own conflicts. She certainly mocks marriage, yet the intense beauty of Eve’s and Adam’s lyrical visions of union—visions both sexual and transcendent—reveals her genuine attraction to marriage as a glorious, even if “strange,” “paradise.” Nor is her conflict simply dichotomous: the poem’s criticism of marriage employs comic tones that bespeak sympathetic understanding of human limitations more than condemnation, while the fleeting lyric passages may be partially undercut by the preponderance of more ironic lines surrounding them. Rather than seeing the argumentative structure of the poem in terms of oppositions, only one of which could logically represent marriage, it is useful to invoke the idea of “discursive boundaries.” The lyrical moments associated early in the poem with Adam and Eve expand the boundaries the reader will ascribe to marriage yet do so without greatly altering its more emphatically presented limits: the “amalgamation” Eve so compellingly envisions “can never be more than an interesting impossibility” and Adam’s fantasy is labelled an “illusion.”

As already suggested, the differences between Eve’s and Adam’s orientations prepare for the later vitriolic dialogue between “She” and “He” (completely post-lapsarian versions of the married couple), and the spectacle of their battle clarifies Moore’s implied distinction between the poem’s two major forms of disputation: one, the purely antagonistic fight, such as that dramatized by He and She; the other, a battle waged as much with oneself as with another, dubbed by Moore “the fight to be affectionate.” As noted above, Moore values the latter kind of conflict tremendously, proclaiming:

“no truth can be fully known
until it has been tried
by the tooth of disputation.”

In contrast, and although Moore later asserts that we should not call “friction a calamity,” the friction between “He” and “She” is purely destructive. The distinction between these different kinds of disputation provides a basis for analyzing the poem’s structure. Alternately, either the antagonistic fight or the “fight to be affectionate” forms the dominant mode of discourse of the text; the poem shifts between these modes which, in different parts, appear in varying degrees of intensity and purity, and support changing positions on the value of marriage. Of course, the distinction between these two modes of conflict is no more dichotomous than the
contrast between the poem’s lyric and ironic tones. While
the antagonistic fight involves simple opposition to another,
the fight to be affectionate involves more complex
dynamics and may as well characterize a struggle within
the individual as a struggle between partners. Here again,
the idea of expanding discursive boundaries illuminates
Moore's method. The poet clearly deplores hostile conflict,
but in its stead she presents a myriad of images, metaphors,
and allusions under the general rubric of the “fight to be
affectionate.” And although she ultimately envisions this
fight taking place within the successful union of two
married people, in her poem that fight takes the
predominant form of a struggle internal to the poet’s
persona.

Using this distinction between two forms of
disputation to analyze the structure of the poem, one may
regard the material we’ve already discussed as constituting
the first section: a prelude in which Moore both introduces
her own conflicts and sets up the hostile struggle between
her gendered characters. What we regard as the poem’s
second section, extending from the exclamation, “Unhelpful
Hymen!” to the argument between He and She, is dominated
by internal disputation, part of the fight to be affectionate.
That it is the most difficult section of the poem is not
coincidence, for this is where Moore is least certain and
most conflicted. The third section, the antagonistic
argument between He and She, concludes with Moore’s
analysis of both characters’ weaknesses. With the meditative
line “ ‘Everything to do with love is mystery’ ” the final
section begins, returning to the mode of internal dispute,
though with greater calm than before.

The second section, that containing the most
intense internal disputation, is the core of the poem.
Moore’s strenuous ambivalence appears in every sentence.
In the first sentence, for example, Hymen is “Unhelpful,”
“overgrown,” reduced to insignificance by the commercial-
ization of marriage. But having complained about modern
marriage, Moore also admires the loveliness of its rituals,
their lavishness “augmenting” that of Eden’s lush flora and
fauna. In the sentence immediately following her sensual
catalog of “lotus flowers, opuntias, white dromedaries” and
the like, a “he” we take to be Hymen expresses reservations
about marriage; love is best “from forty-five to seventy,” not
the years in which most enter into matrimony, nor the years
associated with the sensuality of the poet’s previous
description. Hymen’s attitude at this point is one Moore
may well have regarded as sensible, since in a letter to H.D. she expresses similar doubts as to whether there is such a thing "as a love affair in the case of people under 40" (March 27, 1921). Such timing is belated by the standards of modern expectation, but in the poem's terms it does provide for the real existence of "love that will / gaze an eagle blind," love as heroic as that of Hercules "in the garden of the Hesperides." Yet even this fragile possibility of love for those over forty-five wanes as the sentence returns to mockery: the male speaker flippantly commends love as anything from "a fine art" to "a duty . . . or merely recreation."

Again shifting tacks, Moore's next sentence encourages tolerance for this speaker, implying that she may find his commendation of love's uses as sensible as she finds his recommendation of love for older couples; this calls the fluctuating tone of the previous sentence into further question. Her statement also directly counters her earlier depiction of Hymen as "unhelpful": "one must not call him ruffian," she says; nor should one see "friction" within marriage as a necessary indication of its failure. Following the explanatory note that truth must be ascertained "by the tooth of disputation," Moore presents images of pairs that may exemplify her ideal of marriage as disputation that does not threaten union. The first image is persuasive: an "entirely graceful" pair of panthers are perfect complements in color (blue and black becomes black and blue); in awe as well as fear, "one must give them the path." The subsequent pair, however, reintroduces forces threatening to such harmony. An obsidian Diana is paired with a "spiked hand"--but the presumably male hand is hardly to be trusted in assuring the woman he courts that his impatience will sustain her independence. That he "has an affection for one / and proves it to the bone" suggests the opposite of his claims: spikes do harm, and impatience may lead to "bondage."

In the next sentence, Moore reflects on the troubles that Westerners have in marriage as an overlay to

7. Actually, the common myth does not depict Hercules climbing trees in that garden. Rather, in order to accomplish the labor of fetching the golden apples of the Hesperides, Hercules held up the earth for Atlas while Atlas got them from his daughters who guarded the tree. Nor was Hercules undertaking this, or any of his labors, to win or preserve love, but instead for penance (in a fit of madness sent upon him by Hera, he had killed his wife and children). Moore may alter the story to make Hercules a closer parallel to her Adam: in her representation, Hercules, like Adam, is a man in a garden motivated by love or desire for his mate. The knowledge that Hercules killed his wife, however, adds a dark edge to her apparently positive depiction of enduring love.
the troubles she has already represented in marriage itself: "Married people" are generally "mixed and malarial"; "We Occidentals" are, in addition, steeped in that mixed attitude, irony. Her two examples here focus primarily on the negative aspects of this irony. The first refers back to a traditional, as it were archetypal, Western scene taken from the Bible: Esther has to bribe her husband Ahasuerus with elaborate banquets in order to attain justice, despite his easy and repeated promise that he would give her anything, up to half his kingdom (Esther 5-7). In the second example, a "quixotic atmosphere of frankness" characterizes the modern world. Here social interaction functions according to preset rules that disguise the power relations of those present. Although "four o'clock does not exist" according to the decorum of social ritual, "the ladies" receive one at five o'clock "in their imperious humility." Yet this atmosphere of apparent feminine governance, absolute even to the erasure of time, provides the setting "in which experience attests / that men have power / and sometimes one is made to feel it." The falsity of the teatime ritual parallels the scheming of the "tête à tête Ahasuerus banquet": a banquet not at all intimate (since the king's head servant also attends) and not at all romantically intended (Esther has a clear political goal in mind). Furthermore, just as the "spiked hand" earlier suggests the greater danger to women than to men posed by marriage, both these examples reveal women's lack of power in society if not specifically in marriage.

Overall, in this second section of the poem, Moore vacillates. She asserts that turmoil is inevitable in marriage: Hymen is unhelpful, a hand is spiked, power is unequally distributed. Yet she cautions against seeing Hymen as ruffian and will not relinquish her vision of a powerful harmony like that of the panthers and of the gorgeous "ritual of marriage." This section concludes with special emphasis on the difficulties of women in marriage, an emphasis underlined by Moore in her poetry workbook: on what appear to be the first twenty-nine pages of her working on this poem--pages which contain relatively few repeated long lines--Moore repeats eight times that "men have power and sometimes one is made to feel it" (VII:04:04, Rosenbach Museum and Library). Placing this claim immediately prior to the debate between "He" and "She" also makes it reasonable that "He" should speak first (and so viciously) and locates "his" comments within the context of patriarchal power.
In the succeeding section, instead of continually qualifying each view with a contrasting one, Moore explores at length the impediments to union posed by the nature of men and women. This she does by dramatizing an argument in which neither side represents her own views, and neither wages the fight to be affectionate. The viciousness of this domestic skirmish between “He” and “She” establishes Moore’s dismay at the behavior of men and women in many marriages: both parties are nasty and self-serving, suggesting the “impossibility” of any desirable “amalgamation.”

“He” is particularly crude in his accusations: “What monarch would not blush / to have a wife / with hair like a shaving-brush?” Associating women with death, he punningly calls them “mummies” and identifies them with debris from a ravaged corpse and a coffin. Self pitying; he even feels tricked by the shape this wifely object takes: “revengefully wrought in the attitude / of an adoring child.” “She” is more witty than her mate, calling him “This butterfly, / this waterfly, this nomad / that has ‘proposed to settle on my hand for life’-- / What can one do with it?” Some of her insults also reveal a more analytic understanding of gender than his; she presents men in terms of social power as “monopolists of ‘stars, garters, buttons / and other shining baubles’--/ unfit to be the guardians / of another person’s happiness.”

Despite Moore’s slightly more favorable portrait of “She,” both characters are repugnant in their viciousness and both are explicitly condemned for loving themselves too much. This section concludes:

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?

Both married men and women are repulsive enough to alienate all but missionaries. At this point in the poem, all glimpses of an Edenic relation have been lost. The beauty initially associated with both genders has disappeared, as has Eve’s striking individuality, and all that remains is mutual hostility.

These two middle sections of the poem illustrate what Moore evidently sees as the primary obstacles to ideal marriage: on the one hand, the danger of domination, a possible threat to both parties but one more frequently suffered by women because of the support men receive from
patriarchy; on the other hand, the tendency toward overweening self-love in both women and men which blocks the possibility of all but hostile communication. Resisting both these temptations constitutes the individual's and the couple's fight to be affectionate, and it is to this struggle that the poet now returns.

Rather than simply dismissing marriage after the third section's demonstration of its typical failure, Moore in the final section surprisingly reverts to earlier expressions of belief in an ideal, though that belief is heavily qualified and asserted in a different manner. The early passages suggesting the value of marriage do so largely through their lyrical beauty and sensual appeal. Perhaps because such intense beauty exacerbates her conflicts—"it tears one to pieces"—in this later section Moore relies on a more propositional, abstract approach. For the rest of the poem, she will support her claims from the standpoint of reasoning rather than of emotion or lyric eloquence. Yet her belief in marriage, irrational in view of what He and She have just demonstrated, depends on the very recognition that her subject cannot be contained within the bounds of logical argument or casual knowledge: "Everything to do with love is mystery; / it is more than a day's work / to investigate this science." Unwilling to assert that successful union is impossible, Moore concedes only the rarity of a relationship in which the parties fight to be independent yet communicative:

One sees that it is rare—
that striking grasp of opposites
opposed each to the other, not to unity[]

Moore defines the ideal marriage in terms of ongoing opposition. This is disputation at its best. For her, this "triumph of simplicity" dwarfs Columbus' demonstration with the egg that a seemingly impossible feat (sailing west to the Indies, or standing an egg on its head) may in fact be easy, but its simplicity will be apparent only in hindsight. The result of Columbus' daring to attempt what many thought impossible is well known: he took an exploratory voyage resulting in European discovery of the "new world." Determining for one's self the steps necessary to create a

8. Moore refers to a well-known story about Columbus: after returning from his voyage to America, the explorer responds to mockers of his new prestige at a banquet by calling for hard-boiled eggs and challenging everyone present to make an egg stand on its end. After all have given up, he picks up an egg, cracks it at one end, and then stands it on that broken end. At this point, all exclaim that they could have done that, too. Columbus replies that it is easy to say around the world; it is only difficult to be the one to think of it first.
"experience attests that men have power," and in which male power is wielded in large part through words, a concluding portrait of a very powerful male politician and orator invites wariness. Moreover, Webster's support of the Fugitive Slave Act in order to preserve the Union may identify him as another male, like Moore's "He," who arrogantly "forgot" "that some have merely rights / while some have obligations." Throughout this last section, then, Moore still hedges. Certainly, her internal disputation is quieter than before. Yet even now, she cannot present one view, one well tested truth, of marriage. She cannot assert that marriage at its rare best remains an ideal to strive for without undercutting that stance by suggesting marriage is a dangerous excuse for the assertion of patriarchal control. To the very end of this anomalous poem, Moore remains in unresolved contest with herself, and the truth tested by disputation remains fluidly multiple.

In "Roses Only," Moore praises the rose's thorns as saving its beauty from being "a mere // peculiarity." "What is brilliance without co-ordination?" she asks, implying that the prickliness of the rose brings it into relationship with the world, coordinates it, even if only through its sharpness. The rose possesses the perfect "grasp of opposites" within a single form, and its thorn constitutes its "tooth of disputation" with the world. Thorns "[guard] the infinitesimal pieces of your mind," making it possible for contradictions to coexist, for beauty to be an asset as well as a liability. This brief poem provides a lesson about reading Moore's longer poem "Marriage," a poem so complexly disjunctive that Moore can give full voice to each of the pieces of her mind. No other poem in Moore's oeuvre contains such frequent and radical shifts in perspective reflecting such powerful ambivalence about its subject. Yet "Marriage" fits on a continuum with Moore's other works, and the lesson of "Roses Only" may guide our approach to her poetry more generally. The collage-like arguments of Moore's writing suggest that beauty alone, a "crystal-fine experiment" alone, a single excerptable moral alone, perhaps any single line of reasoning, single image, or single perspective alone is "peculiar," incomplete, not coordinated in a world that always involves risk and relationship. A certain complexity is a necessary response to that world, though for Moore that complexity only once--with a subject of immense and immediate personal importance--takes the form of such radically conflicted inner disputation.