

Love, lust and the Irish: Exploring intimate lives through Angela Macnamara's problem page, 1963–1980

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Abstract

This article explores transformations within the intimate lives of married couples in Ireland between 1963 and 1980. I use data from the problem page of renowned agony aunt Angela Macnamara to chart evidence of a renegotiation of the traditional love/lust balance identified by Wouters (1998) which has, I argue, contributed to a greater democratization emerging within these relationships. The problem page reveals tensions between a declining traditional moral code espoused by Macnamara and a new language of sexual and marital fulfilment. This new language was increasingly heard on television chat shows and soap operas, in newspapers and magazines, in Ireland and abroad. It was the language of the women's movement and intellectuals who challenged Catholic social teaching on pre-marital sex, contraception and divorce. This article gives a unique insight into the intersection of the private lives of the column and the broader structural changes which continued to shape those lives, including Macnamara's, over a 17-year period.

Keywords

democratization of personal life, intimate lives, Ireland, love/lust balance, Angela Macnamara, Cas Wouters

Introduction

This article uses problem page data to analyse how men and women negotiated their intimate relationships during 1963–1980. The understanding of what it was to be a romantic, emotional and sexual person was changing during this period as

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Ireland moved slowly from a traditional, agrarian and insular past into a modern, urban and more open future. The openness was fuelled, in part, by the foundation of Telefís Éireann (Irish Television Service) in 1961 but also by the greater availability of books, magazines and newspapers distributed throughout Ireland. A relaxation in censorship law in 1964 and 1967 had enabled Irish people to understand their romantic and sexual selves outside the language of the strict Catholic teachings that had dominated their lives (Inglis, 1998: 21, 51). As new discourses of sex, pleasure and romance filtered through the public sphere, people began to develop new conventions and contest old wisdoms that governed the regulation of lust and love within dating and marriage.

I explore how, women in particular, reconfigured and renegotiated a more satisfying love/lust balance in their relationships. The emotionally cold and distant husband was no longer acceptable to them. Neither were their unsatisfying sex lives. The analysis reveals that the generation of women falling in love, dating and marrying in the 1960s and 1970s expected more than their mothers did – they wanted affectionate husbands and a more reciprocal sexual relationship, where sex was an expression of love, rather than a right or duty within marriage.¹ This democratization of personal life has been described by Giddens (1992: 184) as ‘less visible’ because it does not occur in the public sphere. It is through the use of problem page data that a greater visibility and understanding can be brought to this dimension of personal life.

I am exploring the relationship between these two overlapping understandings of intimate life through the pages of Angela Macnamara’s problem page, using both letters and replies to the column and interviews with her.² The column reflected the tensions that existed within the prevailing gender regime, the influence of Church teaching and an emerging popular broadcast media complete with ‘expert’ commentary.

Macnamara was the most famous agony aunt in Ireland during the 1960s and 1970s. Her column was published in *The Sunday Press* which, with a circulation of 400,000, was the biggest selling Sunday newspaper in the country.³ Macnamara received over 4000 letters a year, publishing a handful in the paper every week, but replying privately to hundreds of letters every month. She made numerous radio and television appearances throughout that time, was the subject of a television documentary broadcast in 1975 and published her autobiography in 2003.⁴ Her career as an agony aunt began when, aged 32, she wrote a series of articles to *The Sunday Press* on teenage dating. Such was the response that she was invited by the editor to respond in what was to become a weekly column. Though with no relevant counselling experience, this aspiring journalist and devout Catholic managed to carve a unique niche for herself as an expert in the field of love, dating and marriage. This was most unusual. How sexuality was discussed in Ireland in 1963 remained tightly controlled within a religious or medical discourse. The elevation of a lay woman to such a prominent position, and the subject material of the column were not initially welcomed by the Catholic Church or by some readers. Macnamara was part of a new openness with which intimate relationships were

discussed in the Irish public sphere but it became clear that once spoken about she would struggle to keep this discussion within the Catholic context she so believed in. The column would be abruptly discontinued in 1980 when Macnamara refused her editor's request to lessen the religious tone of her replies to reflect changes that had taken place in the discussion of sexuality within the public sphere.

The article is based upon the analysis of 645 letters and replies published in the Macnamara column. The letters, like all documents, are partial. They are representative of a specific constituency of readers who believed and followed the teachings of the Catholic Church. Wouters (2004: 156), following Zeegers (1994: 131) identifies this group as trend followers. Compared to radicals or moderates who are open to greater levels of sexual experimentation for trend followers there is little exploration of sexuality where a desire for stability, predictability and observing the sexual 'do's and don'ts' remain paramount. The discussion of a wider canvas of sexual desire encourages not emancipation, but great anxiety among trend followers or traditionalists who remain slow to adapt to a new sexual culture but who eventually do. The letters were subject to an editorial censorship that excluded letters about intimate sexual problems and homosexuality, especially during the 1960s. The column reflected the conservatism of the newspaper's owners and ethos. Letters were also edited by Macnamara to fill the available space in the column. I was sensitive to what extent, documents like the problem page, claimed an authoritative status (Atkinson and Coffey, 2004: 73) and the implications of this on the relationship between their production (authorship) and consumption (readership). When questioned, Macnamara often declared, after consultation with 'experts' (usually religious), that her reply was simply the 'truth'. The publication of letters that revealed sexual ignorance or supported the Catholic Church's social teaching on contraception, divorce and especially sex before marriage sparked some speculation amongst Dublin's liberal elite about the authenticity of the letters. Following Tosh (2002: 98), the article does not rely exclusively on the letters. The column is located within a body of literature that advised Catholics, including Macnamara herself, on dating and marriage. They are compared and contrasted with other articles in *The Sunday Press* and other problem pages of the era and are understood and analysed in the light of interviews with Macnamara.

Understanding intimate relations and family life

I am using Wouters' (1998, 2004) concept of the love/lust balance to explore this shift in how men and women understood and acted upon this new regime governing their intimate lives. As traditionally defined, men were located at the lust end of this spectrum while women, predictably, were found on the love side. It was part of a broader process of what Wouters (1986) called an informalization process which took place throughout the 20th century that would explain any movement on this spectrum of love and lust. He charts the relaxation of manners, etiquette and deference towards elders and authority figures, a process that accelerated in the 1960s. Discussion and practice of pre-marital sex, unmarried co-habitation,

homosexuality and pornography were all part of this wider informalization. This may have led to a more equal interdependence between the sexes, but this shift from the external supervision of behaviour within social life to a more internalized one also brought with it an expectation of restraint and self-control. Wouters (1998: 187) is interested in charting the move from a traditional lust balance to where women more openly discussed their need for a more satisfying interplay between love, affection and sex in their relationships. Using data from the Dutch women's magazine *Opzij*, Wouters shows how women sought a more satisfying love/lust balance leading to a 'liberation' in sexuality but which was followed by a formalization of attitudes in the 1980s. Crucially, as Wouters (1998: 190) admits, men's reactions to these processes were not included because no comparative magazine existed. Brinkgreve and Korzec (1979) was the first empirical study into the process of informalization. Again, through the use of the advice column in the Dutch women's magazine, *Magriet*, they study the changing trends in advice and what they revealed about the power relationships between men and women, parents and children. As the women's movement progressed and women became more financially independent of men, the balance of power with men became more equal thus having the consequence for the intimate relationship between the sexes. This greater equalization of the relationship between the sexes has become a prominent element of work documenting the transformations within family life and the intimate sphere.

Wouters' (2004) work also allows us to place these changes within this love/lust balance in Ireland within a broader international context. His comparative study of manners books and advice columns charts the changing courtship regimes in the Netherlands, England, Germany and the USA since 1890. The study illustrates how women successfully moved themselves out of the private domain and into the world of work and leisure unhindered by a system of chaperones. It shows how policy decisions in individual countries in relation to divorce, welfare and educational policy impacted upon the interrelationship between the sexes. It facilitates a greater understanding of how sexuality in Ireland slowly moved from a context of reproduction to one of pleasure and self-expression when placed against an international backdrop. Crucially, Wouters' study goes some way to answering the question: How different was Ireland in matters of emotions and sexual intimacy?

There is a substantial legacy of research on the gendered Irish family (Arensberg and Kimball, 1968; Brody, 1973; Humphreys, 1966; Messenger, 1969; Scheper-Hughes, 1979). It reveals that the inability of both men and women to self-disclose an emotional self within an intimate relationship led to high levels of dysfunction in romantic, parenting and sexual encounters. It contributed to a now legendary association between sex, shamefulness and the Irish. This research also charts family change over a period of industrialization and urbanization: crucial processes in the separation of the 'feminized' private sphere of emotionality from the 'masculine' public sphere of rationality.⁵ For Baggot (1965: 34–5) the processes were already under way in Ireland. Recent economic development in Ireland had greatly

increased the pressure on men to succeed in the world of work, masking their 'inner-emptiness' where their emotional lives never had the opportunity to develop.

It was Arensberg and Kimball's (1968) study on Irish family life that has cast the longest and most influential shadow over a generation of work in this field. Gender roles were understood in the context of the part they played in the continuity of the farming community in Co. Clare at that time. It was the needs of the rural economy that dictated how men and women experienced sexuality with a requirement for heirs and the needs of inheritance ranking far higher than the desires of the body or heart. It was men who were deemed to have lower sexual standards and most likely to lead girls astray. Discussion about sexuality was confined to the 'laughter and hearty guffaws with which references of near any kind to sexual intercourse, sexual attraction and childbearing were greeted' (1968: 199). Messenger (1969: 68–69) revealed that a common belief found amongst men was that a good woman didn't enjoy sex, while the 'marriageable man... is usually repressed to an unbelievable degree'. The relationships between family members were also problematic with Messenger (1969: 78) speculating that the close mother–son relationship contributed to a Freudian scenario where men avoided foreplay, the female breast and frequently rejected women after sex. Scheper-Hughes' (1979) study paints an even more depressing picture. She revealed a community where love was not a prerequisite to marriage and where men were 'awkward with women, troubled by sexuality' (1979: 97). Married couples showed no outward affection for each other, often not even using each other's first name, with Scheper-Hughes concluding that it was socialization that led to the 'early orientation towards emotional distance and "sexual flatness"' (1979: 116). For the women Rohan spoke to (1969: 69–74), there was little appetite or expectation of sexual satisfaction within marriage. For men there was little hope that they could provide that satisfaction with widespread ignorance of the female orgasm reported by men, although they most often complained about their wives' lack of interest in sex. Both sexes were limited in their exploration of sex within marriage because of their inhibitions and a sense of an internalized shamefulness.

Contemporary studies have also explored intimate life in this period. Hilliard (2003) re-interviewed women from a previous study on urban family life in the mid 1970s focusing on long-term processes of change in the women's lives and covering areas such as their married sexual lives. The study revealed high levels of sexual ignorance among married couples and a belief held by women that it was sinful for them to refuse sex with their husbands. The views of men were not part of the remit of her study. While the study of men's public lives have documented their successes in the political, economic and scientific worlds, scant regard has been paid to the intimate worlds they inhabited. I have previously explored the areas of sexual education, dating and relationships with gay men in this period (Ryan, 2003). This revealed that their communicative competence around sexuality was seriously impaired by their family upbringing and Catholic schooling, where they struggled to balance the potential freedoms with which a more open, modernizing Ireland brought, with the pull of tradition, family and community which held them back.

The growing importance of love and intimacy within Irish marriage

When Macnamara's problem page was launched in 1963 the nation had many questions about love and sex that needed answers. She saw her job as twofold. She wanted a greater openness in the discussion of relationships and sexuality and wanted that discussion to take place within the context of the Catholic Church's social teaching. It was mission impossible. Even among the Catholic faithful there was growing confusion, anger and a desire to question Church teaching, especially on pre-marital sex, contraception and divorce.⁶ This desire was given a platform through the media. The popular chat show *The Late Late Show* started broadcasting in 1962 and soon became embroiled in a series of controversies as programmes on sexuality, feminism and the role of the Catholic Church raised the ire of the hierarchy and the faithful.⁷ Television soap operas such as *The Riordans*, first broadcast in 1965, challenged traditional sexual mores throughout its 15 years on the air (Gibbons, 1984: 34). From the introduction of an unmarried mother in 1966 (significantly an English 'outsider') to storylines of marriage breakdown (in 1972) and contraception (in 1974), the programme demythologized Irish family life through drama (Gibbons, 1984: 41).

The letters Macnamara received would reflect these wider debates in the public sphere. Many women wrote about their unhappy marriages, specifically the lack of emotional reciprocity and dissatisfaction with their sex lives. It is these two areas that I see as central to the renegotiation of the love/lust balance and I have drawn a selection of letters from those analysed to illustrate these processes. Women reported that their husbands had been affectionate and attentive suitors but shortly after marriage had changed into cold, neglectful mates (26 March 1967; 18 February 1968; 5 December 1971; 17 April 1977; 11 December 1977). Male affection was deployed, often as a precursor to sexual intercourse which, in turn, made the women emotionally withdrawn from their husbands. The letters also cast doubt on whether love – particularly for men – was really a prerequisite to marriage at the time (Scheper-Hughes, 1979: 97).

Macnamara believed that marriage was for life. Never once in 17 years did she advise a letter writer to separate from their spouse, even in cases of extreme domestic abuse (27 June 1965). Macnamara's glass was permanently half full. She was attempting to influence the direction of two rising tides within intimate life – the romanticization and the sexualization of love (Inglis, 2003: 143–9). Her advice sought to reassure women that the lack of emotional reciprocity was in fact a common feature of married life. The advice reflected Macnamara's reliance on a number of Catholic dating and marriage guides from the USA, France and Ireland, which she also recommended to her readers (Baggot, 1965; Dufoyer, 1962, 1963; Kelly, 1963). She accepted the underlying premise of these texts; that the different natures and psychologies of men and women had led to misunderstandings and false expectations within marriage. A solution to this, suggested in Wouters (2004: 73), shows how manners books in the Netherlands between 1939

and the 1960s attributed the freer contacts between the sexes to the introduction of co-education. In Ireland, the answer to the absence of male affection lay in the re-education of men to the emotional needs of women and the ability to communicate those needs to their spouses – a clear indication that the ‘complementary’ roles within marriage were lacking. This letter is typical of the frustration felt by many women by their husbands’ lack of affection.

Q: I’ve a good husband but he never shows me affection beyond a small kiss in the morning and when he comes home. He never gives me a warm hug of affection or rarely makes an affectionate comment, or tells me of his love. He only does these things when he wants the marriage act, so I don’t feel they are affection then. I seek all my affection from the children and I notice many wives do likewise. Can I change my husband as I feel I am making myself be cold towards him to try and lessen my need for his affection? (1 December 1968)

In her reply Macnamara does not blame men for their transformation from affectionate suitors to neglectful husbands or women for failing to be more assertive in communicating their needs. This is in sharp contrast to American articles reviewed by Wouters (2004: 159) that suggest that from the mid 1960s women were encouraged to actively express their anger which, rather than being negative, was an essential part of conflict management in intimate love. For Macnamara, women should praise their husband’s minimal efforts rather than demand more emotional reciprocity. Such advice was reminiscent of a feature of advice columns identified by Wouters (2004: 148) prior to the 1960s where women remained largely submissive but negotiated their relationships through sweet-talking their husbands as opposed to direct confrontation. Macnamara does let men off the hook here. As it is ‘not part of a man’s natural inclination or temperament to be so warmly affectionate’ she replies, the displays of tenderness through courtship were a means to an end, a conquest. Dufoyer (1962: 70) similarly identifies this ‘desire for conquest’, which drives men above and beyond their masculine psychology to perform acts of gallantry to secure the woman’s agreement to marriage. It would appear that men and women were reading from very different romantic scripts. Dufoyer (1963: 14–15) confirms to young men, to whom the book is directed, that the romantic phase of their lives will generally end in their mid 30s as they turn to their ambitions outside the family home. In fact, it is women who are at fault. Driven by a hypersensitivity that encouraged them to view their husbands more critically after marriage, women focused on each failing and slight against them.

Giddens (1992: 60) sees men as ‘laggards’, historically excluding themselves from the transitions occurring in intimate relationships. The concept of romantic love has always had an ambiguous relationship with men’s desire for, and access to, sexual conquest. For Giddens they have misunderstood a basic prerogative of modernity – where the self, including an emotional self, becomes part of a reflexive project that is constructed and reconstructed over the life course. For women, romantic love becomes both a tool of oppression but also a key means with

which to actively interrogate masculinity (1992: 2). The letters on the subject of unemotional husbands may well reveal the naïve, gendered expectations of some romantic newlyweds, indeed other women are scornful of them as needy 'immature women who require praising' (21 May 1967), but they represent a refusal to compromise on the romantic vision which they have been sold. Macnamara's column and other print and broadcast media contributed to this romanticization of love, a development not welcomed by all. Many letter writers castigated Macnamara for filling young girls' heads with thoughts of love and romance (15 January 1967; 8 October 1967).

Crucially, it is the letters from these romantics and Macnamara's replies that represent a considerable challenge to the existing balance between love and lust. The letters contribute to a growing trend within Ireland that saw women enter into both a public and private dialogue with men about the importance of emotions like love and intimacy within a successful marriage. It set in motion a process where relationships would be built upon the reciprocal exchange of love, intimacy and sex. With the renegotiation of the traditional love/lust balance there were new opportunities but also responsibilities to monitor and supervise the conduct of their own relationships against a greater democratization of personal life throughout the column and beyond.

From a 'rights and duties' discourse to a sexualization of love

The analysis of the letters reveals that often, the sex lives of married couples were motivated not by a desire for individual or reciprocal sexual fulfilment, but rather as a procreative and potentially sinful 'duty'. Over the course of the column's publication this would change. Some women's complaints were more basic. Neglectful husbands that had abandoned them for the pub several nights a week and expected sex on their return were unacceptable (22 May 1977). So too were men who did not possess even the most basic hygiene (18 August 1968; 27 January 1980). For most women their enjoyment of sex was mediated often by their fear of pregnancy and the economic burden of an expanded family (16 November 1980). Indeed Macnamara reveals during interview that it was women's withdrawal of sex as a crude method of contraception or, as she describes in the column, as a punishment for their lack of affection that angered men and further damaged the relationship (28 December 1975; 11 September 1977). By contrast, Wouters' (2004: 126) study showed that both the introduction of the pill and an expected self-restraint had contributed to a decrease in the fears and anxieties surrounding sex. The letters do clearly reject a notion that women were simply uninterested in sex. It was far more complex and nuanced where their enjoyment of sex lay within a relationship in which there was self-disclosure and subsequent fulfilment of wants, needs and desires.

Dating guides had traditionally encouraged women to yield to men's greater sexual demands within marriage. Dufoyer (1962: 59–60) warns women to expect men's greater need for sexual intimacy with 'rhythmical frequency'. Macnamara

acknowledges this in interview. On the occasion of her own marriage, her mother advised her on the subject of marital intimacy that 'men want more and you just have to give it to them'. This advice reflected an understanding of that time of the rights and duties of a married woman to her husband. Hilliard's (2003: 36–37) study of married women's sexuality in the 1970s similarly reveals this 'strong sense of a husband being entitled to the sexual availability of his wife'. Women were, at that time socialized to expect little control over their fertility or their sexual lives. The sinfulness of refusing one's husband and a fundamental belief in the shamefulness of the sexual act influenced women's enjoyment of sex. Letters to the column (2 November 1980) reflected those of Hilliard's respondents and the wider societal view.

Q: I confessed to my doctor that I was not always ready for sex with my husband. He told me to ACT as if I liked it and never refuse my husband. Well! I should have got an Oscar as I acted myself into a large family and a breakdown. Now I have retired from the acting profession. I clean the house, cook the meals, look after husband and children and accept all sexual advances passively. My husband seems to believe there can be no love without sex and so I'm considered frigid. My husband has never said 'I love you' never given a kiss without expecting sex. (30 October 1977)

Sexual relationships were further complicated by a genuine suspicion, by some men, of women who displayed an interest in or enjoyment of sex (Baggot, 1965: 21). Wouters (2004: 125) had also identified this trend in advice columns in the Netherlands, but in the 1930s, where women were portrayed as indifferent to sexual intercourse. In the USA, he suggested that women were curtailed by a double standard that blamed women for sexual transgressions (2004: 140–141). Ireland was no different in this regard, although the consequences – such as incarceration in a religious-run Magdalene home – could prove far more serious.

As one letter writer (30 October 1977) revealed, women often participated in sex even when they found it distasteful, seeing it as an unpleasant necessity to achieve the much coveted home and family. More worryingly, the letters revealed that women often did not feel that they had a choice whether to refuse sex or not.

Q: Have married men the right to force themselves on their wives in any kind of way? His demands are excessive and certainly unusual and he gets mad if I don't give in to him any time he wants, and fires things around. I am sure that what he does is sinful. Can there be any sexual sin in marriage? (1 June 1969)

Q: Hasn't a wife a duty to fulfil her husband's physical needs in marriage, even in later years? (16 August 1970)

Q: Mine is a rather silly question but at least it's short. I just want to ask is it ever right for a wife to say no to her husband's advances? (4 April 1976)

Economic growth, urbanization and the expansion of third level education all contributed to a changed context in which people would conduct their intimate lives (Inglis, 2003: 132–135). Armed with a new knowledge derived from books, especially self-help manuals, magazines and television, the column's analysis reveals how this was translated into a growing dissatisfaction with marital sexuality for many. Primarily this would be among married couples, especially women, but later the population as a whole. This was in contrast to Wouters (1998) who had charted a more open discussion about sexuality among both single and married women during the 1960s. Indeed, it must be remembered that Wouters' data were drawn from *Opzij*, a radical feminist magazine and in sharp contrast to Macnamara's conservative outlook. In both cases this process of sexualization of love would be neither linear nor continuous with the advent of HIV/aids and, in Ireland, the Kerry Babies Case redefining sexuality and the body in the 1980s.⁸

The state of Irish marriage came under increased scrutiny, particularly in the 1970s with a greater public awareness of the unhappiness with which many couples found themselves in. Articles published in *The Sunday Press* by commentators such as Dr Noel Browne dramatically claimed that married couples were 'forced to live in a continual cock-pit of mutual self-hatred' (9 December 1973).⁹ Others highlighted the plight of deserted wives (13 January 1974; 27 January 1974; 23 June 1974). Women's organizations like AIM, founded by Nuala Fennell (1974) revealed the precarious financial position women faced with regard to desertion and social welfare, while Rohan's (1969: 43–63) exposé of Irish marriage focused on relationships that had broken down but not broken up. This was in sharp contrast to the situation in the four countries under review in Wouters' (2004: 149) study. All had simplified the procedures for obtaining a divorce, which, combined with a declining stigma and more financial assistance for women leaving relationships, contributed to a lessening of the dependence women felt upon their husbands.

There was a greater discussion about the role a happy sex life played within marriage in the Irish media. Even within *The Sunday Press* there was a parallel discussion of sexuality very different to Macnamara's. Journalist Gillie Kennealy's (11 May 1975) article *Put the love back into sex* claimed that married couples were no longer going to put up with a sexually unsatisfying relationship. People's expectations of marriage had increased she wrote, with young people wanting career and personal fulfilment and a satisfying sex life. She argued that it seems that 'a mutually enjoyable sex life is more important than some people traditionally believed'. She refers to the 'bang-bang' attitude that men still have to sex and the belief that sex is obligatory – that every touch, kiss, must lead to sexual intercourse. Women were now feeling that they were sexual failures because popular glossy magazines put so much emphasis on the ability to achieve orgasm. *The Sunday Press's* main rival, *The Sunday World*, had been publishing a more salacious problem page of their own contributing to this trend.¹⁰

Kennealy's articles reinforced an emerging view within Irish society that placed a satisfying sex life at the centre of a successful marriage. They also highlighted

how much Macnamara's column now seemed out of date, a development that did not go unnoticed by her editor. This process had emerged earlier in the USA. Seidman's (1992: 22) review of the role sex manuals played in the sexual ideology of the 1960s argued that they conveyed multiple meanings of sex as reproduction, love and pleasure. Those manuals from the 1950s still located sex within reproduction, but stressed its central importance to a happy marriage and it was this sexualization of love and marriage that contributed to a greater culture of eroticism. It was only in the 1960s that sex began to be explored as an act of pleasure and self-expression (Seidman, 1989: 303). Sex was seen not as an expression of love or reproduction but something autonomous for the exclusive exploration of pleasure and self-expression. By contrast, the seemingly liberal discussion of the Kennealy column still located the pleasures of sex within the context of married relationships.

As the column progressed into the 1970s the letters reveal men and women's greater desire to discuss sexual difficulties within their marriages and seek solutions to them. Women who wrote to Macnamara were dismayed by their inability to achieve orgasm and the speed with which their husbands did. They were saddened by the gulf that often existed between their sexual relationships and the lack of emotional or intimate connection with their husbands. The following are examples of such letters.

Q: We are married over two and half years now. We were both virgins when we married. Lately I feel a terrible change in our lovemaking... It takes about fifteen minutes now and immediately afterwards my husband goes to sleep... He used to say lovely things and he was so gentle... Our present lovemaking rather than drawing me closer to him makes me feel so far apart as though I was a stranger. At times I've tried to tell him to be more slow but he says he reaches climax. (31 July 1977)

Q: How I would love if my husband made love to me. Now I don't mean if he'd have sex – he's always ready to have sex... I mean if we have sex it only takes a short time and I feel little or no response. I don't think Irish men in this country know how to make love. (13 April 1980)

Some women who wrote to Macnamara could not escape a view of sexuality as something dirty and sinful. Others lacked any communicative competence to express their sexual wants to their husbands who often through ignorance or selfishness were uninterested in more reciprocal, female-centred relationships. This trend also remained slow internationally. Wouters' (2004: 126) review of sex research in the Netherlands revealed that up to 50 per cent of Dutch men continued to have an aversion to oral clitoral stimulation in the 1970s, although this had declined to 20 per cent 10 years later. In Ireland, men wrote to Macnamara, often saddened by their wives' lack of interest in sex (16 October 1977).

The majority of letter writers to Macnamara sought not to end their relationships but to take advantage of new opportunities to improve them. Unlike proponents of an individualization thesis (e.g. Bauman, 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim,

2002; Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) that saw a declining kinship influence over family members and the elevation of choice in intimate relationships bring greater fragility and risk to them, the analysis of the column reveals a continuity in strong bonds of love and connectedness between family members. A woman who had always felt financially dependent on her husband returned to the workforce (21 October 1979; 17 August 1980). A married woman in her mid 50s asks if it was too late to discuss with her husband why she gets so little pleasure from sex (15 February 1976). There is no doubt that women were leading this quiet revolution facilitated by a changing social and political context; one in which the feminist movement played a key role. Macnamara interpreted some of this self-development as evidence of a rising individualism. In an article (30 November 1975) she claimed that:

In our society today, self expression, self development and self fulfilment are emphasized... We are living in a time of individualism. This encourages selfishness, which is the very antithesis to love. It can never be right to develop oneself at the expense of others.

Love requires us to be, according to Macnamara, 'other centred' as opposed to self-centred (11 September 1977). I argue that a consequence of renegotiating marriage to achieve a more satisfactory balance between love and sex led in turn to a greater equality within relationships. For Giddens (1992: 189), it is the principle of autonomy that is central to the emergence of the pure relationship within personal life. Autonomy is the result of the 'successful realization of the reflexive project of self' which enables individuals to act in an egalitarian way and see that self-development of others presented no threat, nor was it done at the expense of others. Rather than being the antithesis of love as Macnamara claimed, such development may hold the key to the pure relationship. My reference to Giddens here is done cautiously. The economic parity necessary for the advent of the pure relationship in Ireland had not yet been fully realized. Women's participation in the labour market remained low (around 30 per cent) by international standards (Smyth, 1997: 64).

The greater assertiveness of women in the field of love and sex emerged in the pages of the Macnamara's column. Women were now often prepared to make the first move. Men were disconcerted. Some wrote to Macnamara dismayed that their attempts to lead good and moral lives were now compromised by the overt sexual behaviour of women. It would appear that without women playing the role of guardian of men's sexuality, men could easily fall victims to their own desires.

Q: I don't know about city girls as I am a country chap. But I have a lot of experience of country girls and I may tell you many of them throw themselves at men... They'd drag you into a ditch after a dance. Oh yes! I've descended to the animal level with them but I'd never marry one of them. (21 April 1968).

Macnamara offered an alternative view in interview. Such was the pressure to marry that women often made themselves more sexually available to men as

a strategy to secure a husband. I think this is misjudging the pace of social change occurring in Ireland and does not explain a similar desire for sexual satisfaction amongst married women. The arrival of a more sexually assertive Irish woman was not a welcome development for Macnamara. She had long argued that even when women possessed greater sexual knowledge than their boyfriends it was not their role to educate men in these matters; rather it was through their modest behaviour that was men's true education (4 January 1970). Macnamara could not condone a movement of women towards the lust end of Wouters' (1998) spectrum. In the 1970s especially, single women emerged as more dangerous figures that flirted and slept with men they knew to be married or had boyfriends (5 September 1976). Again, men were seen to be powerless in the face of such sexual provocation.

Q: Would you please write something in your column about the married seducers that are filling our dancehalls... The girls seem to have so little hesitation in flirting with the married man and it's not only mild flirtation... I'm not blaming the men anymore than the women but men are, generally speaking, morally weaker than women. If provocative girls mad to get a man fill the dancehalls then weak men are going to make hay while the sun shines.

A: In all the current talk about women's lib I think we very often forget to consider women's strength and their consequent responsibilities. Once a woman sees herself as a 'man hunter' she tends, not only to lower her own dignity and lose the respect of men but also to encourage lowering the standards and sense of responsibility of men. (4 July 1976)

Macnamara may have regretted the advent of greater individualism but she recognized that Irish marriage had changed forever. In advising happily married women who were still not enjoying sex with their husbands she suggested that 'at least some women and possibly quite a number of men... haven't yet got used to the new understanding of marriage partnership' (4 March 1979). This 'new' understanding is in opposition to a more traditional rights and duties discourse governing sex and implied a more equal partnership within intimate life.

Conclusion

In this article I have argued that a transformation occurred within the realm of personal and intimate life for many married couples during the period 1963–1980. The use of problem page data has allowed access into this private domain to chart what I argue has been a renegotiation of the traditional balance between love and sex. It is, however, a renegotiation that came later to Ireland compared to other western countries. Several reasons contributed to this. The early segregation of the sexes increased the level of awkwardness between them. As adults, government policies governing laws on contraception and divorce mediated their experience of sex often more as a reproductive duty or a fear of an increased economic

burden than an exploration of pleasure. The result created an unnecessary strain within relationships that delayed a move to more female centred pleasure and a wider process of a sexualization of love. With high levels of religious observance, a higher proportion of married couples would have conformed to Wouters' trend followers where greater levels of anxieties surrounded sexual exploration.

Women have spearheaded this exploration. It has brought with it many unintended consequences. By solving intimate problems in a public forum women were reshaping the social, political and economic context in which they lived their lives. The solutions lay in a new body of expert advice, Macnamara included, that encouraged women to reveal their emotional and sexual needs within marriage. This context changed from men also. Their intimate relationships changed too as they have responded to or contested women's 'new' needs within marriage. This article brings a much-needed visibility to the emotional lives of men through both their own problem page letters and those of the women who sought to navigate relationships with them. The gaze inside some Irish marriages revealed how these new options, both economic and emotional, opened up a greater world of possibility.

Notes

1. My understanding of this range of emotions as socio-construct is influenced by Lupton (1998: 38). Like her, my interest is in how emotions are played out within the 'lived experience' of relationships where they are mediated by existing constructs of gender and power. How we experience and express emotions in these everyday practices becomes part of a gendered self, which is constantly (re)constructed.
2. I interviewed Macnamara in 2008 during my analysis of the column. The purpose of the interviews was to delve behind the column into the context and circumstances under which it was constructed. I was influenced by Hill's (1993: 62–63) use of Goffman (1959) in how documents can be viewed as a front-stage perspective, while interviewing Macnamara herself would provide a valuable back-stage perspective.
3. *The Sunday Press* was part of the Irish Press Group, first published in 1931; it closely allied itself to the cause of Irish nationalism, the promotion of the Irish language and coverage of Gaelic games. It promoted a vision of Ireland built on a romantic notion of the respective roles of men and women in Irish society. *The Sunday Press* was launched in 1949 and was critical of the growing popularity of British Sunday newspapers that were alien to the Irish character. Sales of *The Sunday Press* peaked in the mid 1960s with a circulation of 400,000 but declined towards to the end of the 1970s. See O'Brien (2001: 86).
4. The Radharc documentary on her life was first broadcast by RTE on 24 April 1975.
5. The Irish home had remained a unit of production rather than consumption for much longer than in Britain for example, where the idealization of the family as a refuge from industrialization can be traced to the 19th century. See Sennett (1977) and Lasch (1977).
6. Divorce was outlawed in 1925 and in the 1937 articles 41.3.1 and 2 of the Constitution declared that no law would be passed to provide for the dissolution of marriage (Hug, 1999: 18). Contraception remained technically illegal in Ireland under a 1929 act until the Supreme Court overturned the ban in 1973. (see Hug, 1999: 96–99). Many Catholics were disappointed and angered when *Humanae Vitae* reaffirmed traditional Church teaching on contraception. See Smith (1991).

7. Some of these controversies have entered Irish television folklore. In 1966 the Bishop of Galway condemned a discussion with a newlywed couple who discussed their honeymoon where the woman replied she couldn't remember if she wore anything that night. On the 'Bishop and the Nightie' debacle see Inglis (1998: 231–232) and Kenny (2000: 217–218). See Connolly (2002) for a discussion of the media strategies used by the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s.
8. The Kerry Babies Tribunal was established after the discovery of two dead babies in 1984. Suspicion fell upon a single woman, Joanne Hayes, who was having a relationship with a married man. Her confession and that of her family to the crime it was later proven they did not commit, led to an enquiry about allegations of police misconduct. The tribunal of enquiry brought about a forensic investigation into the sexual conduct of Hayes, which became a modern witch hunt of a sexually transgressive woman. See Inglis (2003) for a detailed discussion. The 1983 abortion referendum was a divisive campaign to place a ban on abortion in the constitution. Although passed, the ambiguous wording has led to four further constitutional amendments. See Hesketh (1990).
9. Noel Browne was previously a reforming Minister of Health 1948–1951. He continued to champion issues such as women's and gay rights. On Browne's political and professional careers including his psychiatric practice see his autobiography, Browne (1986).
10. *The Sunday World* was launched in 1973 and would mark the end of *The Sunday Press's* dominance of the Sunday newspaper market with a unique combination of sport, gossip and entertainment (see O'Brien, 2001: 132). Its agony aunt, *Dear Linda*, blurred the lines between problem solving and titillation.

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