Fictionalizing History in Alison Weir's The Marriage Game: A Novel of Queen Elizabeth I

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Abstract

In the contemporary landscape, historical novels have emerged as a crucial medium for encapsulating past events in a captivating and memorable manner. This paper delves into the significance of historical fiction as a tool for portraying history, focusing on the reliance of modern readers on these novels as a source of historical insight. Specifically, it examines how historical fiction, with its narrative prowess and imaginative liberties, has become instrumental in filling the gaps left by traditional historical records.Central to this discussion is the work of historian Alison Weir, whose novel *The Marriage Game: A Novel of Elizabeth I* serves as a compelling case study. Weir adeptly navigates the realm of historical fiction to address contentious aspects of Elizabeth I's life, employing fictional elements to portray historically known events that have long been shrouded in controversy. Through imaginative storytelling, Weir not only breathes life into the past but also challenges established narratives, offering fresh perspectives on pivotal moments in history. This paper explores how Weir's approach to blending fact with fiction in *The Marriage Game* blurs the lines between reality and imagination, inviting readers to engage critically with historical discourse. By examining the interplay between history and fiction in Weir's work, this research illuminates the dynamic role of historical novels in shaping our collective understanding of the past.

الملخص

في المشهد المعاصر، ظهرت الروايات التاريخية كوسيلة حيوية لتجسيد الأحداث السابقة بطريقة مشوقة لا تُنسى. يتناول هذا البحث أهمية الخيال التاريخي كأداة لتصوير التاريخ، مركزًا على الاعتماد الذي يوليه القراء المعاصرون لهذه الروايات كمصدر للفهم التاريخي وتحديدًا، كيف أصبحت الروايات التاريخية، بفضل قوتها السردية وحرية الخيال، أداة أساسية في سد الثغرات التي تركتها السجلات التاريخية التقليدية. يتمحور البحث حول عمل المؤرخة أليسون وير، لعبة الزواج: رواية عن إليزابيث الأولى فتتنقل وير ببراعة في عالم الخيال التاريخي لمعالجة جوانب مثيرة للجدل في حياة إليزابيث الأولى، باستخدام عناصر خيالية لتقديم تصور جديد للأحداث التاريخية المعروفة التي

طالما كانت محط جدل. من خلال السرد الخيالي، لا تُضفي وير الحياة على الماضي فحسب ، بل تقدم أيضًا تحديًا للسرديات التقليدية، مما يفتح المجال أمام وجهات نظر جديدة حول لحظات مفصلية في التاريخ. يستكشف هذا البحث النهج الذي اتبعته وير في دمج الحقائق مع الخيال في لعبة الزواج ، مسلطًا الضوء على الحدود الغامضة بين الواقع والخيال، كما يدعو القراء إلى المشاركة بشكل نقدي في الحوار التاريخ.

Introduction

> Readers of history get a new understanding of some part of our past. Readers of a novel about the same period come to know that past in a different way. They feel almost as if they had lived in that past. Such impressions, once made, are very hard to shake. A reader may forget the story yet retain a kind of certainty about life in its period (Brodine, 1988, p. 207).

In the above selection, Brodine commences her insightful article "The Novelist as Historian" pinpointing the difference between reading history as 'history- proper' or reading a historical novel. The reader of a historical novel tends to experience the past as if he or she had lived in it, and this feeling once conveyed, would give the reader a kind of certainty about life in the past not attained by reading 'history- proper' itself. In this sense, the novel could be an articulation of history and could even do the job of unfolding the secrets of history in a more accurate and interesting manner. With this realization, "historical fiction," contends Brodine, "gives its practitioners great power and a responsibility to commensurate with that power" (p. 207), so it is important to her "as a writer as it is to historians" that her readers are given a picture of a 'real' past, not of a past that never was (p. 207). In other words, the writer of historical fiction should be aware that it is his or her responsibility to paint an accurate picture of the past in the novel to achieve credibility and avoid distorting the facts of history in any way. Brodine further states that "there is recent evidence of a welcome recognition by historians that historical fiction should be considered in all seriousness" (p. 207) arguably because, as mentioned above, it has the capacity to tell the tale of history in a more appealing way and as precise as any historical record.

However, this welcome to the seriousness of the historical novel was not always acclaimed by some historians and critics. Cameron (2012) explains that "during the 20th century, historical fiction began to be disparaged by critics who looked down on the genre and its elements of romance, adventures and swashbuckling" (p. xi). This is probably because a historian's main aim is to present historical happenings as they had occurred without the interference of any other kind of genre, specifically fiction, which may corrupt its essence. The disparagement of historical fiction "reached such a pitch that Robert Graves, author of "I, Claudius and Claudius the God", felt compelled to say that he wrote

these novels only because of pressing financial needs" (Cameron, 2012, p. xi). Such a confession is not only surprising, but it also drives one to wonder and inquire about the difference between the worlds of history and fiction that are two seemingly very disparate genres. This also raises the question of where the historical novel resides between the two realms; accordingly, Steven Frye (1998) explains that "the historical novel and historical fiction in general have largely been the province of English departments, while 'history proper' remains within ostensibly 'objective' scope of the academic historian" (p. 135). These departmental distinctions, continues Frye, have a certain validity, insofar as they pertain to the differences in methodology and goals between the two fields (p.135).

Nevertheless, in the postmodern era, explains Frye (1998), multiplicity and fragmentation are its central features in almost all fields of studies. This same multiplicity is also a central element characterizing the current practice of historical composition and that all the various and disparate epistemological assumptions, methodological practices, and prefiguring biases function to influence the writing of history (p.135). In this light, critics and historians nowadays view the writing of history in a different scope and that, debatably, they are ready to embrace other ways in which history could be revealed. In the postmodern era, for example, "the epistemological status of 'language', 'text', and 'truth' remains an open rather than a closed question" (p.135), which again asserts that how history is perceived in postmodern modes has dramatically altered. Frye (1998) explains:

> As a result, the rigid and convenient distinction between history proper and historical fiction has become rather problematic. The academic conflicts within history, philosophy, and English departments testify to the breakdown of these conceptual demarcations, and in this environment, the historical novel offers a wholly unique alternative to 'history' as traditionally conceived (p. 135).

The historical novel then, as stated in the above quote, becomes a legitimate means to depict history in the eyes of New Historicists and postmodernists who now believe in the interdisciplinary studies of history. Cameron (2012) explains that "perhaps it is no accident that at the very moment literary critics, New Historicist and otherwise, began looking for the historical in the literary", and that historians "began to look for the literary in the historical" (p. xi). This seemingly contradictory and paradoxical state of affairs, Cameron (2012) further explicates, can be seen quite clearly within the realm of historical fiction, which often concerns itself with the line between fact and fiction (p. xi). It is here, thus, in the historical novel that the two worlds combine. A historian's job is mainly collecting data from the past and rewriting it for the public to know; he or she is

concerned about recording the facts as they are without focusing on the form and style of the writing. The fiction writer, on the other hand, writes his or her stories bearing in mind that both form and content are always harmonious. A good historical novel, hence, is the offspring of a perfect marriage between a historian's skill of collecting data and his or her flair for the aesthetic. Brodine (1988) explains that "if a novel is poor history, it will not be a good novel. Good history, however, will not necessarily produce good art" (p.208). Brodine (1988) also believes that if a historian's concern with the message fails to convince as art, then it also fails to convince as history (p. 208). One can conclude then that while writing history, elements of fiction should be taken into consideration to produce a complete and appreciated work. Cameron (2012) concludes, "history and literature often go hand in hand, so much so that it is sometimes difficult to distinguish one from the other" (p. xi). It is in this exact sense that both the worlds of history and fiction are thus intertwined in a historical novel.

Another point worth mentioning is the fact that the postmodern historical novel highlights instances where fiction and history not only intersect but also diverge (Murthy, 2014, p.12). Here, Murthy quotes McHale who explains that the postmodern historical novel is structured as either a supplement to history, or as a conscious divergence from it which results in such narratives that subvert official historical records by flaunting plurality and non-absolutism (p. 12). Again, this highlights the different functions of the historical novel specifically in postmodern modes. History presented in such a novel, explains McHale, is revisionist in two respects. First, it reinterprets historical records and changes the content of history by challenging orthodox narratives of reality. Second, it revises and transforms the methods, conventions and norms of historical fiction. All this becomes possible, asserts McHahle, through ontological disruptions where the boundaries of fiction and history, internal and external fields of reference of representation, are transgressed (p.12). He further explains:

> Postmodern fiction . . . mak[es] the transition from one realm to the other as jarring as possible. This it does by violating the constraints on 'classic' historical fiction: by visibly contradicting the public record of 'official' history; by flaunting anachronisms; and by integrating history and the fantastic (Murthy, 2014, p.12).

Concurrently, the postmodern historical fiction writer sometimes finds it necessary to divert from the 'classic' records of history to animate a past world and give it a story worth telling. This same technique is used by the acclaimed historian and historical fictional writer Alison Weir, whose historical novel *The Marriage Game* will be investigated in this research.

Alison Weir is a famous contemporary historian and novelist whose books are bestsellers in her native U.K. and widely read and acclaimed for both her good research and smooth elaborative writing style. The bulk of Weir's books are

purely historical depicting 'history-proper' i.e. writing about real historical events. In 2007, however, Weir experienced a shift in her role as a historian when she published her first historical novel *Innocent Traitor: A Novel of Lady Jane Grey*. Weir admits that her first experience writing a historical novel proved challenging to her especially since writing proper history was very different from writing a novel. She says "I thought I knew my craft. But I had to go right back to square one and learn it all over again. It was a baptism on fire. But since then, I've come on in strides" (qtd. in Wagner, 2010, p. 2). In another instance Weir recalls "When I finished the first version [of *Innocent Traitor*], I quite liked it. I showed it to my agent. And he said, 'Well, it's a riveting story, but it's *faction*. You've got to come off the fence and stop being a historian and start being a novelist'" (as qtd. in Wagner, 2010, p. 1). Weir's confessions assert the differences between writing history and writing historical fiction. Perhaps, part of the difficulty of finding a clear-cut answer arises with the juxtaposition of the real and the fictional.

Alison Weir's *The Marriage Game* is a novel that depicts Queen Elizabeth I in her early rule over England and the numerous marriage proposals she received from kings and princes from all over Europe. Being the cunning and insightful woman she was, Elizabeth I manipulated those proposals to ensure the safety of her country from enmity. Cecil, her most trusted advisor and friend called her maneuverings "the marriage game" which Weir adapted as the title of her book. Moreover, the book investigates several reasons for the Queen's refusal to marry and highlights the infamous love relationship between her and the love of her life Robert Dudley.

Literature Review

As this novel was written in 2014, most literature found are reviews of the book that show its strong and weak points. One recent MA study conducted in 2022 takes the book and other contemporary historical novels as examples of depicting Queen Elizabeth I differently from the iconic historical image portrayed in arts and films.

To begin with, most editorial reviews praise Weir's insightful novel and view it in a positive light; for instance, the *Publisher's Weekly* writes "Weir's credible characters and blend of the personal and political will sweep up readers of this engrossing behind-the-scenes psychological portrait of Elizabeth" (Fremantle, p. 1). The *RT Book Reviews* applauses the novel and its author and suggests the book be made into a series. It says "Based on historical events, letters and conjecture, Weir paints a fascinating picture of Elizabeth's years as queen. . . There is enough drama here for a PBS series" (Robin, p. 1). *Random House Australia* writes positively as well, "Bestselling historian Alison Weir brings Elizabeth I to vivid life in a novel of intrigue, sex, plots, mysteries and tragedies, with all the color and pageantry of the Tudor court" (p.1). This portrays Weir's ability to transform her wide knowledge into a novel that captures the attention of its readers. Weir

"gets right inside the head of the Virgin Queen," states Kate Saunders from *The Times,* "The reader has a blissful sense of seeing history as it happens" (p.3). This is exactly what the postmodern historical novel should aim to achieve; the ability to make the reader see the past as it happens and to get a first- hand experience of life as it was back then. The *Booklist* further acclaims the novel and its author, and it praises **"**Weir's impeccable reputation as both historian and a master storyteller [which] guarantees a huge audience for another intriguing Tudor-themed tale" ("The Marriage Game", p. 5). Finally, the *Pocklington Post* writes "Alison Weir is that rare and wonderful thing… an acclaimed historian who can translate her vast knowledge into captivating, convincing fiction" ("Kirkus Book", p. 2).

Conversely, the novel also receives negative criticism perceiving the book as not up to good expectations. The *Kirkus Review* argues that even though Weir is careful and thorough with her research, the characters of the novel fail to feel well-rounded or complex, certainly a tragedy when one is discussing two such historical figures as Elizabeth I and Dudley. *Kirkus Review* also pinpoints a drawback in the novel, where Weir makes frequent mention of the Queen's popularity with her people, yet the novel fails to illustrate this convincingly; in fact, the whole novel suffers from lack of "showing" in place of "telling". This fact may be true, but obviously *Kirkus Review* has not encountered the biographical book written before this novel, *The Life of Elizabeth I,* which examines thoroughly and in minute detail the extent of the people's love for their Queen. Therefore, Weir's intention in this novel is focused mainly on this behavior (the marriage game) during her rule which shaped her into the iconic image she came to be. Another negative criticism of the novel is stated by Elizabeth Fremantle who believes that the sheer weight of Weir's scholarship underpins the narrative, making it endlessly fascinating. But perhaps Fremantale further explains that this great strength is a weakness, as at times, the absorbing detail distracts from the central story (Fremantle, p. 12). Again, these absorbing details are proof of Weir's authenticity and accuracy to historical facts.

Finally, Melissa Lidastone's MA thesis conducted in 2022 highlights a new perspective in which Queen Elizabeth could be seen in contemporary times via examining four contemporary historical novels that take the queen as their main protagonist, and one of these novels understudied is Weir's *The Marriage Game*. Lidastone (2022) argues for the value of fictionalized historical narratives, particularly those that explore the tension between Queen Elizabeth I's political role and her identity as a woman. Drawing on Ernst Kantorowicz's concept of kingship, her thesis emphasizes Elizabeth's personal growth and perseverance as key to her success, challenging traditional views of her as a figure beyond ordinary women. She explores how contemporary authors reinterpret Elizabeth in historical fiction, portraying her as a fallible yet capable female ruler, whose

strength is derived from her lived experiences rather than any divine or supernatural qualities. This approach contrasts with early modern depictions that emphasized her chastity and near-divine status to legitimize her rule. The author highlights a gap in research, noting that while Elizabeth's representation in film has been studied, her portrayal in historical fiction remains underexplored despite her popularity in the genre, which is exactly what this paper is trying to examine. By taking the idea that gaps in historical representations are one of its main drawbacks, this study tries to examine how contemporary novelists and historians like Weir try to fill such gaps in historical records to depict new insightful narratives that can explain much about the Elizabeth I's dichotomy between her political body and her own physical one as a female monarch circumscribing a patriarchal world.

All in all, Weir's *The Marriage Game* is both praised and criticized, but it remains a "compelling historical novel of Tudor drama and suspense" as worded by *Barnes and Noble* ("Barnes and Noble," p. 1).

Statement of Problem

The problem of historiography is that writers frequently come to a dead end in relating some stories that occurred in the past since many historical events were not recorded. As a result, historiographers find themselves unable to show the complete picture of a historical occurrence because of the numerous gaps in the records; this often creates several conspiracy theories about what might have really happened in the past and what might have been the real intentions behind many major decisions taken by important historical figures or monarchs (as in the case of this novel) that shaped the destiny of a whole country.

Thesis Statement

Based on the above problem in historiography, this research explores how Alison Weir's use of fictional elements and imagination in her historical novel *The Marriage Game* provides valuable insights into Queen Elizabeth I's intentions and psychological struggles as a woman in power. By focusing on Elizabeth's strategic avoidance of marriage, despite pressure from Parliament since her accession, the study highlights how her clever maneuvering in the "marriage games" allowed her to retain her rights and authority as Queen of England. Weir's portrayal underscores Elizabeth's ability to outsmart the men around her, preserving her carefully crafted public image and securing her throne amidst trying times.

Methodology

Taking postmodern depictions of the limitations of historiography and their belief that the postmodern historical novel can solve the aforementioned problem via its fictional elements, this research will adopt this method and try to show how Alison Weir's historical novel fills the gaps in the historical records

and reconstructs the story of Elizabeth I's personal and political life and the inner and outer conflicts she faces in securing her throne.

To be able to do the above, this paper chooses New Historicism as postmodern theoretical umbrella to validate its arguments. As a theory, New Historicism can help depict historical facts in postmodern contemporary historical novels by emphasizing the idea that history is not a fixed, objective narrative but rather a collection of perspectives shaped by cultural, social, and political contexts. New Historicism, in fact, challenges the traditional notion of history as a linear, unbiased account of events. Weir arguably adopts this method by using her skill as a historian to work on the researched facts to try to tell a different story than that known to the public, which would satisfy the contemporary reader's imagination. This method also suggests that history is constructed through language, power dynamics, and the interpretations of those who write it in New Historicists readings.

In postmodern historical novels, this approach allows authors to explore multiple perspectives and voices, highlighting the subjective nature of historical "truths." New Historicism encourages a critical examination of historical sources, revealing how they may have been influenced by the author's biases or the power structures of their time. By doing so, contemporary novelists like Weir can create narratives that question official histories, give voice to marginalized perspectives, and explore the ways in which historical events are remembered, interpreted, and reinterpreted over time. In essence, New Historicism helps postmodern historical novels to depict history as a complex, multifaceted story, rather than a singular, authoritative account. This approach aligns with postmodernism's skepticism of grand narratives and its focus on the plurality of truths, allowing for a richer, more nuanced representation of the past.

Moreover, New Historicism aids in understanding a historical figure's thoughts and psyche by placing their experiences, beliefs, and actions within the broader cultural, social, and political contexts of their time. This approach emphasizes that an individual's thoughts and psyche are not isolated but are influenced by the power structures, ideologies, and discourses present in their environment. By analyzing not only a historical figure's personal writings, speeches, and actions but also the cultural artifacts, social norms, and political events of their time, New Historicism offers a more view of how they may have perceived the world and themselves. It helps to uncover the underlying motivations, fears, and desires that shaped their decisions, often revealing the complex interplay between personal agency and external forces. This is how this study will examine Weir's use of all the historical facts begotten by her extensive research as a historian to try to bring to the contemporary reader Queen Elizabeth I's fears, desires, and motivations as she treaded upon a shaky ground to secure her throne.

New Historicism also challenges the idea of a singular, objective understanding of a historical figure. Instead, it considers multiple perspectives and interpretations, recognizing that different accounts and sources can offer varying insights into the individual's psyche. By doing so, it provides a more layered and dynamic understanding of historical figures, allowing us to appreciate the complexities of their thoughts and the influences that shaped their actions. Thus, with the aid of fiction, Weir is able to bring about the probable feelings and emotional turmoil that Queen Elizabeth I might have felt during those trying times.

This research, thus, attempts to answer two questions:

- How does Alison Weir's use of the contemporary historical novel genre in *The Marriage Game* allow her to reinterpret and reimagine Elizabeth I's early reign, particularly in terms of the political and personal dynamics surrounding her marriage negotiations?
- How does Alison Weir's fictionalization of Queen Elizabeth I subvert the traditional image of the Virgin Queen by portraying her as a fallible woman who strategically outmaneuvers her inner weaknesses to construct a stronger and more enduring iconic image for her people?

Discussion

Cameron states, "it is sometimes said that…the difference between 'history' and 'fiction' resides in the fact that the historian 'finds' his stories, whereas the fiction writer 'invents' his" (xi). However, when a historian like Alison Weir chooses to write history in the form of a novel, she would sometimes resort to "inventing" so that she could narrate a unified whole that would awaken a long-lost past. By doing so, she skillfully merges both facts and fiction to attain her purpose. In one interview, Weir states that the reason she chose to write a historical novel in the first place was the research she conducted on Eleanor of Aquitaine, a 12th century queen of England. "It was obvious during my research for the biography," explains Weir, "that there were gaps to be filled. The sources are fragmentary . . . the only way I could fill those gaps would be to write a novel" (as cited in Wagner, 2010, p.6). Weir, thus, chooses to culminate her career as a historian by writing a novel that would satisfy her curiosity as well as her readers. Many great stories in history are fragmented with many gaps, and so the best way to fill those gaps is by imagining the happenings of those moments and translating those imaginings into a novel. In this sense, Cameron (2012) states that the historian needs imaginative understanding for the minds of the people with whom he is dealing, for the thoughts behind their act (p. xi). This is what Weir does in *The Marriage Game*; her need to explain some accounts that shaped Queen Elizabeth's life and the gaps around them made her resort to the tactic of imagination and re-imagination to paint a complete whole. One famous account

regarding Queen Elizabeth's life is the provocative "is she or isn't she?" the virgin queen she claims to be. Weir allows her imagination to wonder and test the theory that Elizabeth I was actually seduced as a teenager by the ruthless Thomas Seymour; an affair that resulted in a miscarriage of that supposed affair. This theory was tested in the prequel to this novel, *The Lady Elizabeth;* consequently, Weir had to revisit this storyline in *The Marriage Game.* However, Weir (2008) explains the reason behind adopting this storyline in a note in her aforementioned book and says that "The 'what if' aspect of history is always fascinating, and there is some contemporary gossip on which to base this theory –had there not been, I would have not developed this storyline" (p. 397). In *The Marriage Game,* Weir had to stick with the former storyline and then picture Elizabeth I's reinventing of herself as the Virgin Queen. Thus, her aversion to marriage stems largely –but not wholly –from the Seymour scandal of her youth (Weir, 2008, p.397). Indeed, for dramatic ends, imagination used by the writer to fill in gaps could alter a story in the reader's mind and perspective, and the historical novel thus becomes the best alternative for a historian like Weir to test the "probable". In *The Lady Elizabeth,* for instance, Weir (2008) proclaims in a note that she makes no apology for the fact that, for dramatic purposes, she has woven into her story a tale that goes against her instincts as a historian. She has argued many times in the past, in print, in lectures, and on radio and television why she firmly believes that Elizabeth was the Virgin Queen she claimed to be since the historical evidence would appear to support that (p. 473). Weir further explains:

> Yet we can never know for certain what happens in a person's private life. There were rumors and there were legends, and upon them I have based the highly controversial aspect of the novel, Elizabeth's pregnancy. I am not, as a historian, saying that it could have happened; but as novelist, I enjoy the heady freedom to ask: what if it had? (p. 473).

Certainly, the "what if" aspect raises the controversial question "Do fictional imaginings succeed where historical documents fail, or are they equally fraught with contradictions, biases, and short sightedness?" (Cameron, 2012, p. xiv). What is certain, however, is that the historical novel gives the writer the chance to re-imagine and reconstruct a past in the realm of the probable. This is exactly what Alison Weir resorts to when writing her historical novel in general and *The Marriage Game* in particular.

In another instance in which Weir allows her imagination to fill the gaps concerning Queen Elizabeth's life is her notorious love relationship with the dashing Robert Dudley. In the novel, Weir allows the couple to share some intimacies, but Elizabeth never once gives herself to Dudley. Weir has also woven into the narrative actual sayings, speeches and written documents related to Elizabeth I so that the story remains as authentic as possible in representing

history. "I use the same sources [of historical facts] as academics," Weir explains, "but I write my histories as narratives [because] history is full of great stories, great characters and wonderful details. If you marry those together, you get something that can infuse with passion". Weir further states, "I'm passionate about history and I want other people to share that passion" (as cited in Wagner, 2010, p 10). Indeed, Weir's passion is translated as the narrative presents history in a lively manner and absorbs the reader in a way that he or she forgets that some of the conversations taking place are actually of Weir's imagination; "the narrator moves between Elizabeth and Dudley, allowing us a glimpse of their hopes and fears," contends Fremantle. "Weir also shows [Elizabeth's] hidden vulnerabilities and the fire in her belly as she conjures a compelling character. Dudley is depicted as sympathetic in his endless frustrations" (Fremantle, p. 10). One very moving scene in the novel that shows the intensity of the love and frustration that both Elizabeth I and Dudley experience is when Elizabeth seeks Dudley in his chamber asking about the malady of his wife. Robert seems distraught by the fact that his wife may be dying, so the Queen impulsively tries to console his worries:

> "I'm so sorry for you both," Elizabeth said, and laid her hand gently on his shoulder. The effect was astonishing. Robert looked up; his eyes met hers; and then she was in his arms, and he was kissing her hungrily, as if he would devour her. No man had kissed her like that those ten years and more. It felt sublime –as if she had been born for this moment. She wanted to go on forever … And then her body responded, quite naturally, and, in fright, she drew back.
> "Forgive me, Bess," Robert breathed startled. "I presumed too much, but you were so kind –and I was so fraught that I forgot myself …"
> "There is nothing to forgive," Elizabeth said, dismayed at the conflict within herself. Robert's eyes held hers, even as his arms still encircled her. "I have loved you for so long," he breathed. "Ever since that day I saw you in the Tower, when we were both prisoners. But I know I have no right. You are the Queen, and far above me now; and I am married."
> "This one is surmountable, if I will it so; the other is not." She was horrified to feel a treacherous sense of relief in that. (Weir, 2015, p.45)

In the above selection, Weir's reimagining of the situation strums on the readers' sensations and awakens sympathy for the couple who are deeply in love yet have no choice in the matter of shaping their destinies. Dudley's married state stands as an obstacle between him and the Queen, whereas Elizabeth I's greatest obstacle is the fact that she is afraid of commitment as depicted in the scene. Her fear is not only of her marrying but is actually even more complicated since she does not want a husband to rule over England in her name. Weir (2015) notes

that she has bluntly spoken the aforementioned words to Dudley –the man she probably loved more than any other; she had no intention of sharing sovereign power, "I will have but one mistress here but no master!" (p. 396). Undeniably, Elizabeth I keeps her promise and never marries anyone despite "the marriage game" she so skillfully plays a part in. She simply dangles the most powerful princes in Europe in hope of her hand (and her kingdom for that matter) just to be jilted later by her when the time was right, which are all reimagined by Weir in the novel.

The intimate scenes, as imagined by Weir, not only make both characters come to life as two lovers who have suffered the pangs of restricted love, but also allow the readers to formulate a sense of understanding that explained the Queen's rooted fears of both the subjects of marriage and sex. In her note, Weir explains that she does not believe that the Queen gave herself fully to Dudley because evidence suggests that their private relationship was as much as portrayed in the novel (p. 397). Weir does not allow her imagination to stray away from the true historical accounts because, as a historian, she feels the necessity to keep history intact. "A lot of people love to get their history through historical fiction, so it is very important that what they read is as close to the truth as possible" she explains, "Where the novelist uses her imagination is to fill in the gaps. But even then, you can't let it rip" (as cited in Wagner, p. 7).

Again, Weir cleverly integrates her historical knowledge with the liberties allowed for novelists to create a book that narrates a past without overlooking the need to be as true as possible to real historical accounts or to her intuition as a historian. She says on that matter, "what you write has to be credible within the context of what is known about that person. You can't indulge flights of fancy because that sells short both those who know a lot and those who know a little about the subject" (qtd. in Wagner, 2010, p. 8). What is almost certain by Weir is the Queen's strategic maneuverings in the issue of her marriage. At the very beginning of the novel, Weir quotes Elizabeth I's poem, which captures the essence of her marriage games:

> When I was fair and young, and favor graced me,
> Of many was I sought, their mistress for to be;
> But I did scorn them all, and answered them therefore,
> 'Go, go, go seek some otherwhere!
> Importune me no more!' (Weir, 2014, p.7)

In the above poem, the Queen sums up the entire marriage ploy; she was a young and beautiful Queen who was pressured to marry for the sake of the realm, yet her cunning and shrewd mind understood that marriage was a trap that would strip her of all her power. In one instance in the novel, Count de Feria, the Spanish ambassador stood before her to discuss the delicate matter of her

marriage (Weir, 2014, p.13), and when the queen gave him permission to speak, he said:

> 'Naturally your Majesty could not contemplate ruling alone, without a husband to guide and support you, and be the father of your children. Maybe you will give some thought to a suitable choice. My Master, King Philip, is happy to advise you.'
>
> No, thought Elizabeth, and no again. I need no advice, and I will not be Philip's puppet. 'I am not contemplating marriage just now,' she said, as pleasantly as she could. 'It may suit me better if I remain unwed. I have too much work to do in this kingdom to think of wedding'. And, ignoring the astonishment on Feria's face, she swept on briskly to the subject of the aggravating French, their mutual enemy. (p.13)

Elizabeth I understood the calamity to befall her kingdom once she succumbed to marriage; she could not jeopardize her freedom and country by marriage:

> "I will never marry! she declared. She has been saying it since she was eight years old, and she said it again later, when Cecil proposed raising the matter of the succession in council. 'Your Majesty must look to the future security of yourself and the realm,' he reminded her, a touch severely, as he thought she was being frivolous.
>
> 'Must? she echoed. 'Do you say must to me William?'
>
> 'Madam, marriage is your only surety. That you wish to remain a maid is not natural.'
>
> 'I am not natural!' she retorted. 'I know it.'
>
> 'A husband would share the cares and labours of the government,' Cecil persisted, ignoring her. 'He would father the heirs who will carry on your Majesty's line.'
>
> 'Aye, and relegate me to the nursery! Elizabeth said, tart. 'No, I will not suffer a man to rule me and usurp my power.' (pp.13-14)

The decision of her not ever marrying was taken long before she was crowned; Elizabeth I understood what marriage meant in a patriarchal and misogynistic world, so she would never capitulate to any pressures to do so from either her close advisors or the parliament. Weir, thus, fictionalizes the pivotal moment when the queen was addressed by the House of Commons with a petition stating that it was of utmost importance that she marry because "Princes are mortal, but kingdoms are immortal" (Weir, 2014, p.28) and that if she did not marry, or remain a "Vestal Virgin" it would be contrary to public opinion (p.28).

Being the smart woman she was albeit being very irritated with the petition, the Queen managed to present a diplomatic answer to all those who were present in the room stating that she had chosen to stay unwed, even though great princes

had sought her hand. She explained that she considered herself already married to the kingdom of England as she extended her hand with her coronation ring elegantly displayed to all the eyes in the room (p.28). Still, Elizabeth I did not want to rule out the possibility of her marriage, so as part of her game, she kept a small door open for negotiations conducted in the issue of her marriage. She states:

> 'Every one of you, and indeed all Englishmen, are children and kinsmen to me. Sirs, I will do as God directs me. I have never been inclined towards marriage, but I do not rule it out completely. I promise you, this realm shall not remain destitute for an heir. But in the end, this may be sufficient for me, that a marble stone shall declare that a queen, having reigned such and such a time, lived and died a virgin. (pp.28-29)

Nothing could force Elizabeth I to change her stance about marriage, not even the lure of bringing an heir of her body to carry on her succession as Cecil explained warily (p.29). Her only mission was to project a new iconic image to her people, an image of a virgin untouched by vice, pure and devoted to the service of her people who were all her children. She did not need any son of her own body who would not lack for supporters who might conspire to overthrow her, a mere woman as she explained angrily to Cecil (p.29).

Elizabeth I understood that even a son she bore from her own body would be used as a political tool against her; she did not want to lose the throne she had just inherited to anyone, not even to her own flesh and blood. Weir, in the novel, imagines a scene where Dudley and herself were walking alone in the privy garden after she was pressured to find a husband by the House of Commons, and she explained her stance towards marriage:

> 'You heard what my Commons said,' she began as she and Robert strolled along the path that led towards the River Thames. God's blood, I do not see how I can marry and stay a queen! The husband holds dominion over his wife, the queen holds dominion over her subjects.' She turned to face him. 'Robert, you know better than most what my life was like before God brought me a crown. I am free at last of all those who put me in danger or forced me to do what I did not want to do. I do not have to tread warily anymore. I like my power. I feel liberated. But what power, what freedom would I have if I married, tell me?' (p.31)

The queen was sure that accepting a marriage meant that she would be doomed to a life of servitude and powerlessness. She could never do that to herself and subject herself to the fear of being toyed with. However, Robert's love and ambition to marry her meant that they would disperse into thin air with her stubborn stance, so he interrupted:

> 'That [marriage] would depend on whom you married,' Robert said, after considering for a moment. 'Some men [Like himself] would consider themselves sufficiently lucky to win your sacred person, and would not ask for more'
>
> 'Knowing men, I doubt it,' Elizabeth snorted.
>
> 'Then, Bess, may I suggest that you have not known the right men,' Robert ventured.
>
> 'Aye, maybe I have not,' she said, considering, refusing to take his bait.' (p.31)

Robert was her sweetheart, but she was technically safe around him since he was already married to Amy Dudley. She loved to keep him around her, but she knew that marriage was out of the question. He, however, had different plans, and he told her that he too did not understand the reason for her refusal to marry, she replied distressed, "I cannot explain, Robin, I would only say that I would rather enter a convent or suffer death than be forced to renounce my virginity" (p.31). Weir's usage of historical facts merged into her historical novel allows her to bring to life the controversial character of Queen Elizabeth I. She uses imagination to offer a psychological analysis of the unexplainable behaviors of the queen towards her sweetheart, Dudley. Even when suitors came rushing in for the Queen's hand, Dudley was kept close to her side witnessing her games, and when his wife Amy died in mysterious circumstances, and it seemed that the path was finally clear for them to marry, Elizabeth I brought him close to her at times and pushed him far away as possible at other times. She never gave in to the idea of marrying him, a fact that broke his heart and rendered him a sympathetic character in the novel.

Weir presents the queen in *The Marriage Game* as a vulnerable woman traumatized by her mother's execution at the hands of her father. Elizabeth I confessed to Dudley when she was 8 years old that she would never marry after the execution of her stepmother Catherine Howard. Weir highlights the horrors that this young woman may have witnessed in her life, which would somehow explain the reasons behind her refusal to marry albeit openly enjoying all the courtship and flirtations that came with it. The narrator allows us to venture to the inner heart and soul of Elizabeth I: to feel her happiness, sadness, pain, and suffering. Weir turns Elizabeth, the mighty iconic Virgin Queen, into a real woman living amongst us anytime, anywhere who suffers the pangs of a traumatized childhood. In fact, in *The Marriage Game*, "Weir opens a window into Elizabeth's complex and confounding soul" states Fremantle. The *Pocklington Post* writes:

> Using years of research, contemporary records and real conversations, Weir explores Elizabeth's reasons for remaining a Virgin Queen. Fear of losing her grip on power, her genuine

> desire to serve her people, an early disastrous affair with Thomas Seymour, lessons from her own mother's life and fear of dying from childbirth become intrinsic parts of Elizabeth complex and credible psyche. ("Book Review", p. 15)

The above quote shows not only Weir's ability to imagine Queen Elizabeth's troubled emotions, but also her ability to translate and reflect these emotions for the reader to identify with. Thus, the strategy of imagining and re-imagining that Weir uses in her historical novels -- in general and in *The Marriage Game* in particular – offers an eye-opening experience to the readers of today and suggests that "our desire to re-imagine the past has a very lively and interesting future" (Cameron, 2012, p. xiv).

Conclusion

In short, when writing historical novels, the writer develops a narrative element in which "through the focus on the people and the circumstances that make up the historical moment, allows for an understanding of history's meaning at a more personal level" (Frye, 1998, p.139). In other words, this narrative component mainly focuses on the people and the circumstances that create the historical event rather than the event itself, which allows readers to understand history better and interact with it at a more personal level. In *The Marriage Game,* Weir does practically the same thing. The narrative element in her novel focuses on Elizabeth I and all those in direct contact with her in the making of history. This allows for a better understanding of the historical circumstances happening at that time, specifically when Elizabeth I had to deal with the problematic issue of her marriage to secure an heir to the kingdom. Her frustrations, passions, intelligence and fears are skillfully woven by Weir into the narrative, thus making the whole past come to life as forcefully as if it were in the present.

Another way that the narrative element in the novel succeeds in representing history is when Weir selects the historical events that would weave in smoothly with her narrative. Dolezel (1998) states that "the writer of historical novels or stories is free to choose from the available historical material according to his or her aesthetic and ideological aim" (p. 794-795). Weir (2015) actually does that as she explains in a note in *The Marriage Game,* "the use of language in a historical novel is always a challenge. Here I have made extensive use of the recorded sayings and exchanges of Elizabeth I and the people surrounding her, although I have modernized their words slightly in places so that they remain accessible and in keeping with the narrative" (p. 397). Weir also states that her novel is based closely on the historical record, although she has allowed herself a few liberties. Conversations that took place over two or three meetings have been shown in places as taking place in one. Minor facts have been tweaked, and quotes have sometimes been taken out of context, or put into the mouths of others. However,

clarifies Weir, they are accurate in spirit (p. 397). In this sense, Dolezel (1998) quotes Paul Veyne who contends that history is a palace whose full extent we do not discover, and of which we do not see all the suites at once (p. 795). Dolezel explains that the first source of gaps is the historian's selectivity, guided either by purely practical considerations (the scope of investigation), or by a chosen "plot" structure (p. 795). In Weir's *The Marriage Game,* the events depicting Elizabeth I and her fellow counterparts are carefully selected to fit the narrative structure that has a certain aesthetic quality as one of its twofold aims. The other, arguably, is representing history in the form of a narrative component that would give voices to those people of the past who make up our history and thus offer an insight to historical thought about that period of Elizabeth's reign.

As a final word, Frye (1998) believes that though the past is enigmatic and rendered mysterious by a multiplicity of epistemological assumptions, it must remain an essential element of understanding our world. This could be achieved by lively historical inquiry from various multiple perspectives; the narrative features of novelistic discourse provide key insights and perspectives into the past (p.153) which is what Weir applies to her historical novel *The Marriage Game* and to her other past and upcoming historical novels.

Last but not least, Weir (2008) declares that "Elizabeth's story has all the elements of drama: suspense, tragedy, and dynamics that exist between strong and vivid characters," and she has tried "to remain true to Elizabeth, the greatest of all queens, and to portray her in character" (p. 474). Without a doubt, Alison Weir not only accomplishes that in *The Marriage Game,* but also brings to life the whole historical period and animates it so expertly with the use of imagination and re-imagination intertwined with an affective narrative component that render this historical novel a "must" read.

Future Studies

The exploration of Alison Weir's *The Marriage Game* in this paper opens several avenues for future research that could deepen our understanding of historical fiction's role in reinterpreting and reimagining well-known historical figures and events. Future studies could focus on comparative analyses of Weir's portrayal of Queen Elizabeth I with those in other contemporary historical novels, examining how different authors approach her character, particularly in the context of her relationships with powerful men and her strategic use of the "Virgin Queen" image.

Additionally, further research could investigate how Weir's depiction of Elizabeth I in *The Marriage Game* resonates with or challenges current feminist interpretations of female leadership in historical and literary studies. This could include an analysis of how Elizabeth's resistance to marriage is portrayed as both

a personal and political strategy, and how this reflects broader themes of female agency in historical narratives.

Another potential area of study could involve examining the reception of Weir's novel among different audiences, including scholars, general readers, and critics. Such research could reveal how modern perceptions of Elizabeth I are influenced by contemporary cultural and social values, and how historical fiction like Weir's contributes to the ongoing evolution of her legacy.

Another possible examination of the novel would be conducting a psychoanalytic approach that would examine Elizabeth's character that had undergone great pressures (the effects of her traumatic experiences during childhood and the persecution of her sister Mary Tudor before ascending the throne) that shaped her whole life as a woman and as the ruler of England.

Finally, interdisciplinary studies that combine literary analysis with historical, psychological, and political perspectives could further illuminate the complexities of Elizabeth I's character as portrayed in Weir's work. This approach could also extend to exploring how fictionalized accounts of historical figures influence public memory and understanding history in both popular culture and academic discourse. Hopefully, many studies will be conducted to further analyze the novel and give it the depth and scope it deserves as a postmodern historical novel that tells history in an intriguing and exceptional manner that readers of today will never forget.

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