

A BRIEF HISTORY OF AFFAIRS

An affair is a romantic or sexual story between two people, one of whom (at least) is ostensibly committed to someone else. Most importantly, in our times, an affair is a catastrophe – pretty much the greatest betrayal that can befall us, a harbinger of untrammelled suffering, frequently the end of the marriage it has violated and almost always an occasion for fierce moralising and the division of participants into ‘goodies’ (those who have been betrayed) and ‘monsters’ (those who have betrayed).

However, in trying to understand affairs and make sense of their pains, as well as their less frequently confessed attractions, we should grasp that the way in which we interpret affairs today is very particular to our own times; we are remarkably contorted about the whole business, as judged against the long span of human experience. People have always had affairs, but what an affair means has been subject to huge changes across societies and eras. In order to gain a deeper picture of what we are doing when we look beyond our primary relationships, we need to glance backwards into the history – as well as briefly forwards into the future – of affairs.

Quito, modern-day Ecuador, 1532

The Inca sun-king Atahualpa owns private harems scattered across his empire; he is said to have had affairs with 3,000 women. Few subjects appear to think any less of him for this. All nobles have hundreds of

concubines. There are official regulations concerning the number of mistresses that anyone in government is allowed: a provincial governor can have up to twenty, the administrator of a small village, eight. Having affairs is no sinful slip; it is a central indicator of dignity and status.

Versailles, France, June 1745

The 35-year-old French king Louis XV has been married for twenty years, since the age of 15, to Marie Leszczyńska, daughter of Stanisław I, the deposed King of Poland, a woman whom no one expected him to love – and whom he duly doesn't. Now, Louis has developed a passion for the beautiful and gracious 25-year-old Madame de Pompadour, who is herself married. She quickly becomes the most prominent in a long list of Louis's lovers. The court is delighted for Louis and no one feels especially sorry for the queen, who devotes

herself to music and reading and in time takes a few lovers of her own. A royal marriage is understood in terms of political and dynastic considerations, just as at other levels of society it is seen in terms of property or business interests: a way of uniting two pieces of land or of bringing a useful son-in-law into the family workshop. To marry for love is judged an entirely irresponsible eccentricity as well as a wasted strategic opportunity. The idea that a person should spontaneously want to have sex with their spouse once children have been conceived is deemed bizarre and – in essence – perverted.

Leipzig, Germany, April 1774

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe publishes *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which becomes the most popular novel in Europe for the next thirty years. It is the pre-eminent expression of certain new Romantic ideas around

marriage: that we should only marry for love and that to sleep with someone outside of marriage is a grave offence, emotionally rather than religiously or socially. Nevertheless, the novel acknowledges that it can be deeply tempting to have an affair and that desire doesn't neatly follow legal rules. The hero of the novel has a flirtation with a married woman, but, because he cannot go further with her and is overwhelmed by his own longing, he ends up seeing no other option but to kill himself. The novel emphasises that an affair or even the prospect of one can be both a source of extraordinary delight and the harbinger of calamity. The stakes feel a lot higher now that marriage is meant to be so much more than a practical alliance.

Paris, France, 7th February 1857

The French writer Gustave Flaubert is narrowly acquitted of obscenity charges brought against his novel

Madame Bovary, the first detailed fictional description of sexual infidelity. The heroine of the novel, Emma Bovary, is driven to have an affair for a reason which her society now thoroughly condemns (though it would have been wholly unsurprising to Louis XV): she no longer sexually desires her husband, Charles.

We are firmly in the era of Romantic marriage, and affairs have become appalling phenomena because of the expectation that marriages should be lifetime unions based on enduring love and continuous sexual enthusiasm. By insisting that a marriage partner should be everything to their spouse (co-parent, domestic manager, erotic companion and soulmate), Romanticism turns an affair from a problem into a tragedy. Infidelity becomes the core theme of all the great novels of the second half of the 19th century. From *Anna Karenina* to *Middlemarch*, heroes and

heroines have to die or grievously compromise their social positions following any forays outside of their vows.

Miami, United States, Sunday 3rd May 1987

The *Miami Herald* runs a story revealing that the married Democratic presidential candidate Gary Hart has been having an affair with Donna Rice, a sales representative for a pharmaceuticals company. Up to this point, Hart has been the front runner in the presidential race, but his campaign is upended by the revelation of his affair and after a week of meek protestations and contrite apologies, he withdraws. The leadership of the world's most powerful country has largely been decided on the issue of infidelity. An affair is not simply a private matter – it has become one of the sternest tests of a person's moral worth.