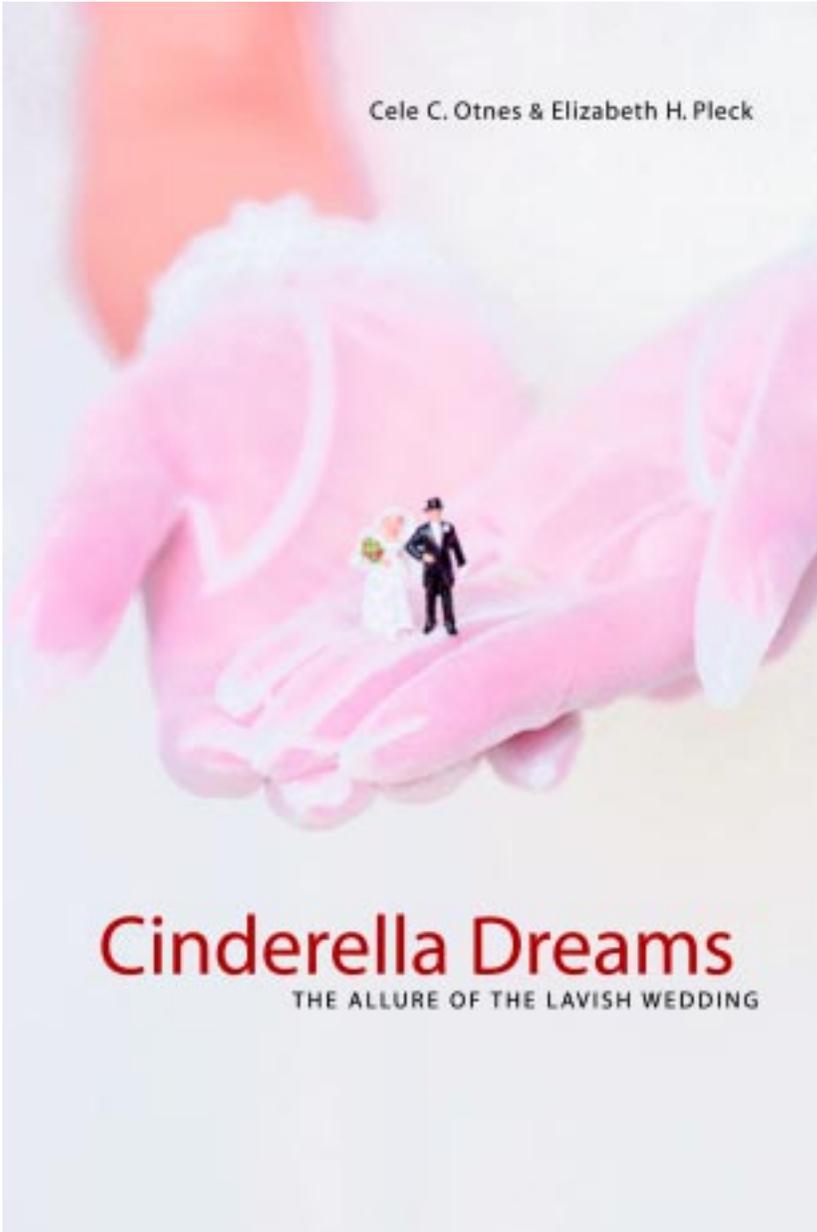


Excerpted from



Cele C. Otnes & Elizabeth H. Pleck

Cinderella Dreams

THE ALLURE OF THE LAVISH WEDDING

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Chapter 3 | THE ENGAGEMENT COMPLEX

Given the amount of detail involved, the lavish wedding obviously does not happen overnight. Engagements in the United States now last an average of thirteen months, a far cry from Emily Post's admonishment in 1922 that "A long engagement is trying to everyone. . . . It is an unnatural state, like that of waiting at the station for a train."¹ Of course, in case the bride and groom are unsure of how best to use this time, bridal magazines and etiquette books provide detailed checklists of goods and services that must be acquired, altered, maintained, and stored for the wedding, according to a month-by-month timetable.

But just what does it mean to be engaged? In Western countries, where couples choose their own mates without parental influence or supervision, it means two romantic partners who have created a "love match" openly declare their intention to marry in the near future. The event that marks the official beginning of the engagement is the proposal, which in most cases still depends on male initiative. The period is marked by a set of ever-evolving rituals, most of which are designed for women participants, and which revolve around lengthy preparations for the "big event." These rituals have become more elaborate in recent years, as if a fancier wedding somehow requires or deserves a more dramatic and magical warm-up.

Renowned ritual scholar Victor Turner defines a liminal condition as

one during which a ritual participant “passes through a realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state.”² During their engagement, the prospective bride and groom each have one foot in both the single and married worlds. But because they are not full-fledged citizens of either and are occupying a “celebratory never-never land,” they may be unsure of their roles and identities.³ As a result—and as is true of all states of liminality—engagements are often characterized by emotional ups and downs, and some of these are caused by the sheer enormity of the tasks involved in planning a lavish wedding.⁴

Throughout the centuries, the engagement period has evolved from one designed to reinforce the ceremoniousness of the marital bond and help prepare the couple to adjust to the roles of husband and wife characterized by premarital gifting and shopping sprees, particularly in consumer cultures. Engagements today are largely secular and consumption oriented. Once, they included their own religious betrothal ceremonies, viewed as legally binding, and featured an exchange of rings between the couple. These ceremonies originated in Roman times because some couples apparently seemed “forgetful of their plighted faith [and deferred] the fulfillment of their nuptial contracts.”⁵

In fifteenth- and sixteenth-century England, an engagement became official when the couple participated in “handfasting” or “contracting,” during which they exchanged solemn vows similar, if not identical, to those repeated in the actual wedding.⁶ Although not required, if a couple participated in handfasting, “there was no backing out.”⁷ However, if an impediment such as an existing spouse or another woman pregnant with the groom’s child was discovered, the ceremony could be declared invalid. Bindings were considered vital parts of engagements by the middle and upper classes and were sanctioned by parents, the church, and the community, all of whom had a stake in reinforcing the solemnity of the marriage commitment.

Around the same time, another religiously sanctioned tradition, the reading of the “banns,” or intention to marry, began to take hold in England. This custom had been made compulsory in France in 1176.⁸ Its purpose was to allow parties potentially harmed by the marriage to come forward and make their cases public. In order to marry in Catholic Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, couples had to either have the banns read three times in church, get a license, or have a public

notice posted, usually on the church door.⁹ Reading or posting the banns had virtually supplanted handfasting ceremonies in England by the late 1600s,¹⁰ and the custom was imported to America by the first settlers. But by the mid-nineteenth century, it had died out among Protestants in the United States, although reading the banns persisted among Catholics as late as the 1930s.¹¹ The tradition was slowly replaced by a nonbinding form of announcement, the placing of engagement notices in the newspaper, which began as an indication of high society in the large cities in the Northeast. In New York City, only families included in the *Blue Book of Social Registries* were permitted to be included in the paper. A prominent name and marriage at the fashionable Episcopalian church were the usual principles of inclusion in large metropolitan dailies outside New York until around 1900. Occasionally, such papers did carry announcements for Catholics and Jews but none for blacks, Hispanics, or Asians, except perhaps those of daughters of foreign diplomats.¹²

Although banns were no longer required by the end of the nineteenth century, the engagement period still retained its legal status through two mechanisms. The first was the waiting period imposed by the various states, a designated number of days between the time the couple acquired a marriage license and the time their ceremony could take place. Although typically lasting just a few days, most waiting periods were designed to prevent hasty trips to the altar.¹³ Of course, some states like Nevada discovered that eliminating the waiting period boosted the state's economy, since all heterosexual marriages that take place in one state are recognized as legal in the others.

The second way the engagement period was legally upheld was through "breach of promise" or "heartbalm" lawsuits.¹⁴ Breach of promise lawsuits were authorized by common law to protect mainly female plaintiffs who claimed injury to their reputations, their future chances at marrying, or their emotional states because of a broken engagement. After posting the banns became optional, there was no longer a clear legal standard as to when an engagement agreement had been reached. Some Victorian judges had accepted a suitor's love letters as indication of a promise to marry. But by the late nineteenth century, while the law still permitted such suits, public attitudes had changed. Women who claimed breach of promise were no longer seen as wronged and virtuous daughters, but as gold-diggers who cheapened the institution of mar-

riage. Moreover, as romantic love became the ethic that governed whether a couple would marry, the courts became more convinced that love should not be regulated by jurisprudence, and that “treating a marriage like a contract made it ‘soul-less’ by subjecting lovers to contractual compulsion.”¹⁵

The major period of reform for heartbalm laws occurred from the 1930s to the 1950s. By the end of this period, the only lawsuits permitted were those enabling the man to sue for the return of the engagement ring if his fiancée backed out of the wedding. This item, it was argued, deserved special status because it was given on the condition of marriage and would not have been provided otherwise. Since the 1970s, a “no-fault” ethic has dominated these cases, meaning the ring must be returned, regardless of who ends the engagement. Interestingly, while men can sue for the return of the ring, the courts do not permit women to sue for any costs they may have incurred for the wedding itself, even if they are stranded at the altar. Obviously, such statutes illuminate sexist assumptions about engagements and weddings; while these occasions may be more “for” women, they have no legal recourse to recoup their investments in the events.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the United States, the engagement period was a time for both the bride and groom to accumulate goods for their new household, and for the man to solidify his financial prospects and acquire a home. The couple often had to wait until the groom could demonstrate he could provide a dependable source of income. In many cases, the bride lived with her family after the marriage until her husband could provide a separate residence for the couple.¹⁶

Besides getting to know her fiancé and his family more intimately, nineteenth-century brides typically spent their engagement periods acquiring the necessary clothing, linens, and other furnishings for their trousseaux. They usually made these items, both because stores were far away and because most did not have the means to buy embroidered hand towels or a floral quilt. A Rockefeller, Morgan, or Carnegie daughter had to allow time for items to be made for her or for a trip to Paris in order to secure the desired linens, lingerie, and dresses from the House of Worth. In 1878, when young Frances Folsom returned from Europe with her mother prior to her marriage to Grover Cleveland, they reportedly had the “rumored trousseau carefully packed in their trunks.”¹⁷ If a girl was

from a family of modest means, the bride, her relatives, and other women friends usually made a quilt and woolen blanket for the bed and hemmed a few towels. She might also have been given bowls, pewter dishes, a coffee pot, some tablespoons, and perhaps a mirror from her parents.¹⁸

Wedding gifts were typically received only from members of the family and a small circle of intimate friends. More widespread gift giving did not begin until the 1880s. As a result, until that time, future brides “shopped, and sewed, and packed, and sewed, and cleaned house, and sewed some more.”¹⁹ Setting up the household was especially important before the marriage, not only because women were expected to create well-feathered nests for their hard-working husbands, but because children typically followed within a year or two of the wedding. And while the bride and groom were busy with gender-specific tasks, they devoted little time to planning the ceremony or even inviting guests. Nineteenth-century weddings were often simple affairs, and relatives who lived far away rarely traveled to them.

The Industrial Revolution brought advances in transportation, communications, and manufacturing, as well as a proliferation of sewing machines and machine-made goods. With all of these developments, it would be logical to assume the bride’s workload would have shrunk and the engagement period consequently would have shortened by the early twentieth century. But paradoxically, a higher standard of living, the development of advertising as a vehicle for the creation of consumer desire, and improvements in retailing merely shifted the arena for completing engagement-related tasks from home production to shopping.²⁰ Instead of relying on her own skills or those of her mother, the bride now turned to seamstresses and department stores for her “necessary luxuries.” As historian Regina Lee Blaszczyk observed, home furnishings, linens, crystal, china, and glassware became consumers’ “major vehicles for expressing class affiliation and individual style.”²¹ Retailers raised the required standard of goods for a household from a homely frying pan, iron kettles, and pepperboxes to a wide range of aesthetically pleasing items typically used on special occasions.

Moreover, retailers had quite a bit of help from authorities who also shaped brides’ ideas of outfitting the household. Solid farm folk rarely described the gathering of a bride’s bundle before the marriage as a

trousseau. But there was some agreement that she would bring some fancy lingerie and items for the household to the marriage. Emily Post began her list for the trousseau with “trimmed lingerie, tea gowns, bed sacques, pajamas,” items of “gossamer and lace . . . for the sole admiration of her husband.”²² Then came the specifications of household items, divided for three classes of brides: the wealthy, the average, and the moderate. In the most extravagant category, her recommendations included the following:

One to three dozen of the finest quality, embroidered, or otherwise trimmed linen [or silk] single-bed sheets, with a large embroidered monogram. If linen, it is dyed to match the color of the rooms.

One to three dozen of the finest quality single-bed linen sheets, plain hemstitched, large monogram.

Twelve to eighteen blanket covers of thin washable silk in white or in colors to match the rooms, and edged with narrow lace and breadths put together with lace insertion.²³

The socially catastrophic events of the Depression and World War II meant different types of work besides acquiring household luxuries pervaded the engagement period. Moreover, there was an increase in the number of “telescoped” courtships and engagements (those lasting a few short months) during World War II, when couples quickly married before a man was shipped overseas.²⁴ This compression, along with the increase in women’s employment, limited the amount of time available for setting up a household. Yet even during turbulent times, the work of the engagement was shifting from women’s unpaid labor into the social and commercial realms. As we have previously discussed, the two most visible causes of this shift were the increase in access to automobiles and the spread of dating, romance, and a culture of couplehood in this country.

Given that engagements were no longer associated with the relatively somber realms of religion, law, labor, or betrothal contracts, why have the “recommended” engagement periods continued to lengthen since the 1950s?²⁵ Given that many women live with their fiancés before marriage, haven’t they already acquired the goods necessary for setting up a household? The answer to this second question is probably “yes.”

Because this is so, the engagement has evolved from being a time for “getting to know you” to “getting it all done” to “getting it all done right,” and now to “getting better or different things” than the couple currently owns.²⁶ In short, the paramount function of the engagement is now to allow enough time for the wedding and honeymoon to be meticulously planned so the couple may revel in romance, magic, memories, and perfection.

Changes in the wedding checklists published in *Bride's* clearly illustrate this point. In 1959, the magazine recommended the bride begin planning a mere two months before the wedding and specified twenty-one tasks for her to complete.²⁷ By 1970, the number of months had increased to six, and the number of items on the “to do” list to forty-seven.²⁸ Although these numbers stayed relatively stable in the 1970s and 1980s, by the 1990s the magazine was advocating a twelve-month planning calendar with forty-four tasks, including such signs of the times as “Inquire about ATMs near your honeymoon site” and “Check final details with wedding professionals.” And while the number of points on the “to do” list seemed to decrease throughout the 1990s, this was only because similar tasks were consolidated (e.g., “Book consultant, caterer, photographer, videographer, florist, and musicians”).²⁹ Even among second weddings, engagement periods are becoming more common, as these types of weddings have come to resemble first marriages in their elaborateness.

Not surprisingly, those rituals of the engagement that have survived are the ones best able to reinforce the increasingly lavish nature of the wedding. One item, the diamond engagement ring, seems “quintessential” in that it is key to fulfilling the promise of romance and magic for the bride.³⁰ In countries from the United States to China, when a woman becomes engaged, she will probably receive an engagement ring containing a semiprecious or precious stone. Most likely, it will be a diamond; consumers in thirty-four countries spend approximately \$74 billion a year on these gemstones.³¹ The “average” diamond ring is now over a carat and is often the first (and sometimes only) piece of expensive jewelry a woman owns. Moreover, these rings are now so inextricably intertwined with the engagement ritual and so devoid of meaning in any other sphere that they have little if any resale value.³² In fact, if a woman divorces, the only acceptable way to dispose of her engagement ring is to pass it on to a daughter or other female relative. Reusing or even resetting

diamonds that have lost their meaning as emblems of a romantic relationship is typically not an option because of the stigma of failed romance these diamonds carry.³³

Like many other customs associated with the lavish wedding, the tradition of the diamond engagement ring began with European royalty. Archduke Maximilian of Austria supposedly gave the first diamond engagement ring to Mary of Burgundy in 1477.³⁴ However, less valuable betrothal rings were known to exist since the second century C.E. in Rome, with brides-to-be receiving circlets of iron or rush as tokens of their upcoming marriages.³⁵ While brides who were royals and members of the nobility sported brilliantly cut stones, wealthy Americans in the mid-nineteenth century had bejeweled gold bands with pearls and engraved romantic sentiments. In the late 1880s, Tiffany jewelers in New York City devised an open mount for the stone that elevated the diamond on six prongs and allowed it to catch the light.³⁶ But what really caused the tradition of diamond engagement rings to take off was, simply put, a marketing campaign as brilliant as the gemstones themselves.

Despite antitrust legislation in the United States, the monopolistic diamond industry has found ways to flourish in this country. It has its roots in a discovery by a 15-year-old boy of a “glittering pebble” on the farm of the De Beers brothers in South Africa in 1867. In 1881, British empire builder Cecil Rhodes bought the mineral rights to the farm. In 1888, the Rhodes mine merged with a nearby Kimberley facility to form De Beers Consolidated Mines and control production in the entire region. As Rockefeller had recognized with regard to oil, Rhodes realized that the main threat to profitability was overproduction. Diamonds are plentiful, not scarce; but the marketing of diamonds was built around making them appear scarce so their price would not plummet when new fields were discovered.

But the story of diamonds is only complete if we acknowledge the Boer men, women, and children and African, often Zulu, men who dug Kimberlite rock out of the ground. They lived amid pneumonia, frequent accidents, and freezing temperatures. Eventually whites secured the skilled and supervisory mining jobs, and the African men who worked underground lived in walled compounds where the sale of liquor was prohibited. The mines resorted to elaborate strip searches and bodily purges to ensure that workers had not swallowed diamonds. Needless

to say, diamond miners could not afford to purchase diamond engagement rings. Even today, few miners are married in Western fashion. They usually are wed in traditional ceremonies in the countryside, then leave their families behind and work in the mines, where they live in all-male hostels.

Ernest Oppenheimer, who bought De Beers from Rhodes's successors in 1929, secured a monopoly on the production of diamonds. In 1934, he established the Central Selling Organization to coordinate the marketing of gems around the world under one umbrella. As was true for all luxury trades, the Great Depression played havoc with the diamond business. Higher-quality, larger diamonds were no longer selling in Europe, but with the Nazi regime encroaching, the black market flourished as anxious refugees sewed uncut diamonds into their coats as mobile assets. In England and France, the appeal of diamonds had never trickled down to classes below the aristocracy. Prosperity in the United States had increased the popularity of diamond engagement rings during the 1920s, so it was there Oppenheimer set his sights as the market most likely to absorb excess production. Even during the Depression, Americans bought diamonds, albeit smaller, cheaper stones that featured "illusion settings" to make them look more impressive.³⁷ In 1938, assuming America would remain neutral during the war in Europe, Oppenheimer sent his son Harry to meet with the N. W. Ayer advertising agency.

Through its initial market research, the agency learned that consumers thought of diamonds as symbols of love.³⁸ It became apparent that the key to increasing the diamond trade was persuading the average man that buying a diamond engagement ring for his fiancée was both a necessity and a luxury and that the ring represented proof of his love. Of course, it was easy for Ayer to create a corollary to this idea: the larger the diamond, the greater the love expressed.

Ayer quickly began a campaign designed to alter "social attitudes" about diamonds and capitalize upon the links between luxury items and romance touted throughout the burgeoning popular culture industry. In a memo to De Beers in 1938, Ayer defined the target audience for its promotional efforts as "some 70 million people 15 years and over whose opinions we hope to influence."³⁹ In order to convince retailers that advertising would not cheapen the image of diamonds, Ayer ran ads in jewelry trade magazines explaining the marketing effort and listing the

magazines where ads would be placed. In actuality, Ayer ran five campaigns in the 1930s and 1940s, each with a different strategic purpose. The first campaign, targeted to men, appeared in September 1939. The copy argued that giving a woman a diamond was an affirmation of masculinity, in that it reflected the man's financial acumen and achievements.⁴⁰ A few years later, Ayer ran a series of ads targeted to women that featured famous churches and cathedrals, thereby associating diamonds with the sacred, elegant church wedding.⁴¹ Using public relations, advertising, product placement in films, and dealer promotions (a tactic known today as "integrated marketing"), Ayer promoted diamonds as indispensable luxury items that all "proper" engaged women should acquire.

One of Ayer's most famous advertising efforts, the "Great Artists" campaign, began appearing in 1939. Featuring highly romanticized paintings by modern artists such as Picasso, Dufy, and Dali, the basic strategy was to "marry" diamond engagement rings with images of high culture, taste, and sophistication. (In 1982, Absolut Vodka used this same strategy to revive its brand.)⁴² The message was that the diamond ring was as unique and priceless as a master work hanging in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Ayer placed full-page, four-color ads in such magazines as *Fortune*, *Town & Country*, *Vogue*, *Harper's*, *Look*, *Life*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Time*, and *New Yorker* to reach a middle- and upper-class audience. In addition to original artwork and poetic copy, the ads also highlighted four sizes of stones—half carat, one carat, two carats, and three carats—and the price ranges for each. Thus, Ayer set the agenda for the appropriate size of diamonds men should acquire and provided a way for less affluent brides to still get their diamonds.

The "Great Artists" campaign was a both a strategic and aesthetic success. But more important for De Beers, it helped increase retail sales by 25 percent in the first six months of 1940 and by 55 percent in 1941.⁴³ Ayer's use of "guilt appeals"⁴⁴ to tug at the heartstrings of hapless grooms was clearly successful. A 1940 ad that employed these appeals also managed to attribute magical qualities to the diamond engagement ring while reminding grooms of the consequences of withholding magic:

[T]here are some things that, neglected now, can never be made up in later life. Not in many a month of someday. Not in the accomplishment of all

his plans for time to come. His engagement diamond is such a gesture. No other ring given in later years can ever hold its precious significance for both of them. Given unworthily, foregone in a sweet gesture of self-sacrifice, it can never be replaced—for in its shining light is stored the treasure of their hearts.⁴⁵

After the war broke out, the American public became aware that diamonds were needed for industrial production. However, Ayer created a campaign that educated consumers on the differences between industrial-grade and jewelry-grade diamonds. Thus, women were told it was perfectly acceptable to acquire a diamond, and moreover that the purchase price of diamonds used for jewelry helped offset the cost of mining the industrial diamonds needed for the war.⁴⁶

In addition to creating multiple advertising campaigns, Ayer arranged for movie stars and celebrities to wear the gems in movies and at gala events. Ayer even persuaded Hollywood to feature diamonds in movie titles and plots. The agency convinced Paramount to change the title of *Diamonds Dangerous* to *Adventures in Diamonds*, and even managed to have a long scene inserted in the 1941 Claudette Colbert film *Skylark*, in which her character shopped for diamonds.⁴⁷ Ayer also created a series of seminars on diamond engagement rings: “all of these lectures . . . are reaching thousands of girls in their assemblies, classes and informal meetings in our leading educational institutions.”⁴⁸ Jewelers gave talks (prepared by Ayer) at service clubs, women’s luncheons, and the like with titles such as “The Right Ring for the Left Hand.”⁴⁹ Gladys Babson Hanaford, known as the “Diamond Lady,” logged 25,000 miles a year for Ayer while lecturing about diamonds across the country.⁵⁰ Such public relations efforts extended beyond U.S. borders as well. In Great Britain, Princess Elizabeth’s engagement ring, acquired in 1947, and her 1953 coronation jewels swelled public interest in diamonds.⁵¹ Elizabeth also toured the De Beers mines in South Africa and accepted a diamond from Oppenheimer.⁵²

Through the mid-1940s, De Beers ads featured diagrams of four different-size diamonds but no positioning line. One night in 1947, Ayer copywriter Frances Gerety, a high school graduate from Philadelphia who had been working for the company for four years, was finishing an

ad that needed a slogan: "I thought: 'Dear God, give me a line.'" She then wrote down "something, not sure if it was right or not, and went to bed."⁵³ The line she had scribbled was "A diamond is forever." Perfectly encapsulating both the lasting asset value of the stone and the romantic aspirations of couples entering into marriage, this slogan became the mainstay of the De Beers campaign in the United States. It also conveyed the idea that the ring should not be resold because of its sentimental value. Ayer immediately incorporated the slogan into all efforts for De Beers. Except for a brief but disastrous experiment during the "Me Generation" of the 1970s ("A Diamond Is for Now"), it has remained a mainstay of De Beers advertising.⁵⁴ In 1999, just a week after Frances Gerety died at the age of 83, *Advertising Age* named "A Diamond Is Forever" the best advertising slogan of the twentieth century.⁵⁵ Yet it is important to remember that for all its fame, it was actually the five advertising campaigns Ayer created for De Beers prior to the appearance of this slogan that contributed to the widespread adoption of the diamond engagement ring tradition.

Savvy jewelers, movie producers, and other entrepreneurs also helped spur the sale of diamond engagement rings during the 1950s. In 1951, Mary E. Lewis, president of the Federation of Doll Clubs, created "Little Queens and Big Diamonds." These crepe de chine dolls were replicas of monarchs and celebrities in wedding or other renowned gowns and featured genuine miniature engagement rings. The ring for the Princess Elizabeth doll was an authentic diamond solitaire of one-tenth of a carat in a six-prong setting. The series also featured Queen Victoria at her Diamond Jubilee; Elizabeth I, the Queen Mother; and Her Serene Highness, Princess Grace of Monaco.⁵⁶ In 1953, the movie *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, starring Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell and featuring the hit song "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend," was an enormous box-office success. The association of Monroe's blonde-haired, big-bosomed beauty, sexuality, and femininity—showing off her diamond while wearing a strapless pink taffeta gown—helped make the allure of these stones undeniable for women. In short, these messages about diamonds led to the formation of the "diamond mystique," which contains several seemingly contradictory polarities, including hard/soft, giving/receiving, ice/fire, virgin/whore, and temporal/eternal. Diamonds are perceived both as virtuous and as passionate, which makes the meanings of the dia-



Figure 5. De Beers “Great Artists” ad, 1954. Courtesy of De Beers, Inc., and the John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising, and Marketing History; Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library; Duke University Libraries.

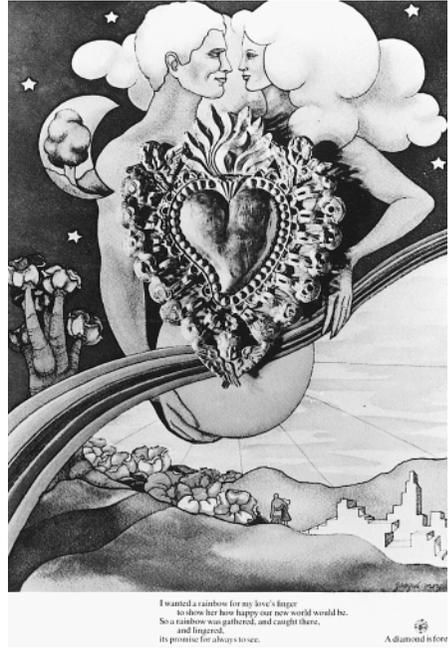


Figure 6. De Beers “Great Artists” ad, 1969. Courtesy of De Beers, Inc., and the John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising, and Marketing History; Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library; Duke University Libraries.

monds deep, complex, and awe-inspiring. Such contradictions no doubt make diamonds all the more appealing and desirable to their owners.⁵⁷

The message that worked was that the diamond was an expression of love from a man to a woman. Henry Peterson, another entrepreneur who worked in the jewelry industry in the 1950s, was a former engraver who became president of the Feature Ring Company of New York City. In 1956, he created the “Acceptance Ring,” designed for a woman to give to a man once she had said “yes” to his marriage proposal. The rings featured brilliant-cut diamonds mounted in white gold and were engraved with the phrase “Omnia Amor Vincit” (Love Conquers All).⁵⁸ The Acceptance Ring never caught on because the diamond was seen mainly

as a feminine object. Jewelers were trying to double the “target market” for engagement jewelry, but the public refused to accede.

Spurred by its success in the United States, De Beers began to export the diamond engagement ring tradition to other parts of the world in the 1960s. To spearhead its overseas campaign, De Beers chose another advertising agency, J. Walter Thompson, because the agency had already established international offices in many key cities in Europe and Asia. J. Walter Thompson translated “A Diamond Is Forever” into several European languages, beginning in 1962. At first, Europeans were slow to embrace the idea that diamonds could be more than elite jewels or investments. But in 1967, De Beers discovered that the “tri-set,” a third wedding band studded with diamonds, was popular among Germans. The popularity of this variant of diamond jewelry helped Germany soar to first place among European markets in adopting diamonds.⁵⁹

It was in Japan that De Beers met with unparalleled success. Prior to World War II, the jewelry collection of a Japanese woman typically consisted of pearls and coral. When the De Beers campaign began in 1968, fewer than 5 percent of women in that country received diamond engagement rings; by 1981, the figure was 60 percent. De Beers’s success in Japan can be attributed to J. Walter Thompson’s inspiration that the ring should be positioned not as a gift from the groom to the bride, but as part of the *yuinōhin* bundle of gifts offered from the groom’s family to the bride’s household.⁶⁰ By the 1980s, the Japanese were typically spending three or four months’ salary on an engagement ring, as opposed to the “two months’ salary” norm established by Ayer in its American advertisements.

With the diamond engagement ring tradition now firmly entrenched in its most profitable markets, De Beers could tailor its advertising messages to the most prevalent sizes of diamonds available from its mines. When an excess supply of small diamonds became available in the 1960s, Ayer developed the “Four Cs” of diamond buying—cut, color, clarity, and carat weight—and emphasized these features over the size of the stone. When there was a shortage of clear diamonds, the agency emphasized those with a more yellow hue. Unfortunately for the cartel, by the mid-1970s the suggestion to downsize had worked too well, and the average size of solitaires fell to .28 carat, down from one carat in 1939.⁶¹ In 1983, De Beers ordered Ayer to execute an about-face in its advertising

APRIL NATIONAL JEWELER
1957

*Reviving an
old tradition...*



THE
Feature
Acceptance Ring

the perfect betrothal gift

For Him...



Each man's Acceptance Ring is beautifully inscribed with the traditional expression of love and faith... "Love Conquers All" from the Latin—"Omnia Amor Vincit."

MADE FOR EACH OTHER™



*matched to the
Feature Lock
diamond rings
For Her.*

Handsome presentation case creates a "double" sale for you!



THE ACCEPTANCE Ring, token of love and faith from the bride-to-be to her beloved... proclaiming to the world that he is her accepted.

Now, the tradition of the ACCEPTANCE Ring has become today's accepted betrothal fashion.

Mr. Jeweler, when you show the exquisite FEATURE LOCK Rings for her... just show the handsome matching diamond ACCEPTANCE Ring for HIM! You'll make an EXTRA Sale!

So don't lose any time in being the FIRST to CASH IN on this NEW TREND!

Write today for stimulating ACCEPTANCE Presentation...

Includes over-the-counter selling tips, ad mats, counter cards, beautifully illustrated customer folders, "personalized" form letters and more.



Contact your auth-ri-zed FEATURE LOCK WHOLESALER today, or write for full information.

FEATURE RING COMPANY, INC. 130 WEST 46TH STREET, NEW YORK 36, N. Y.

Figure 7. Men's Acceptance Ring ad, 1957. Courtesy of the John W. Hartman Center for Sales, Advertising, and Marketing History; Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library; Duke University Libraries.

and reemphasize the importance of having a “rock,” with headlines such as, “A full carat or more. Halfway isn’t your style.”⁶²

That the tradition of diamond engagement rings has become an undeniable part of American culture, and that it also represents a return to security and comfort, was evident in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Many Americans decided to advance the dates of their weddings, even if it meant cutting back on the elaborateness of the ceremonies.⁶³ However, diamond engagement rings soared in popularity, especially among the small but nevertheless profitable segment of men who had never given their wives an engagement ring. During the ensuing recession of 2001, which worsened after September 11, consumers changed the way they shopped for diamonds, shunning Tiffany, Cartier, and other high-priced jewelers and paying half price for comparable diamonds at the more than four hundred merchants in the “Diamond District,” a two-block area in midtown Manhattan, the largest diamond market in the country. Just as was true in World War II, many diamond shoppers were brides or wives sent by their grooms or husbands to preselect their rings. One customer, married for fifteen years, reported she and her husband were going to renew their vows for a fourth time, and after she had picked out her (most recent) diamond, her husband would “‘surprise’ her someday with the ring and another marriage proposal.”⁶⁴

Etiquette has always dictated that it is perfectly acceptable for a woman to be involved in selecting her engagement ring. But Ayer had discovered what the customer above exemplifies—that women still want an element of romance and surprise when their rings are presented to them. But how could men make this joint purchase a surprise? The answer was by ritualizing the *giving* of the ring, so that even if the bride knew what she was receiving, and might even help pay for it, she would not be privy to the “magic” surrounding its actual receipt. An internal report created for Ayer in the 1980s recognized this fact, noting “the giving should not be made to seem casual. The elaboration and creation of ritual and ceremony would work to sanction more giving and getting of diamonds in keeping with the spirit of the diamond.”⁶⁵

The ritualization of the proposal seems to be an invention of the twentieth century. Prior to that time, at least in America, there appeared to be only two phases to proposing: the man asked a woman in person or in a letter and then met with her father to ask his permission. The potential

groom was expected to outline his financial assets and prospects, and the woman's father might have asked the couple to delay their plans if the man's status seemed tenuous.⁶⁶ In unusual cases, because of a father's absence or death, the groom asked the bride's mother for her hand.⁶⁷ Only in groups featuring unusual chaperonage, such as wealthy Southern planters or Hispanic ranchers, did the suitor ask the bride's father before going to the bride. The tradition of the man "on bended knee" seems to be merely a dramatic flourish in stereopticon pictures and silent films. None of the great suitors in nineteenth-century literature—Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice*, Mr. Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, or Laurie in *Little Women*—actually fell to their knees.

As late as 1969, Emily Post still mandated that the groom should ask the bride's father for her hand. With the impact of feminism, this custom began to die out, both because it suggested that the bride was property to be exchanged between men and because it implied the bride's father deserved more respect than her mother. Like many patriarchal gestures, this one has been reinterpreted as a bow to "tradition" or "respect for parents." Etiquette manuals and magazine articles written in the last twenty years label the ritual as optional, suggesting instead that the bride inform her parents with the groom at her side.⁶⁸ Moreover, a recent article in *Newsweek* recommended that even though the couple has probably discussed marriage, it is important for the would-be groom to "put in a call to the parents" and either plan a surprise trip to a romantic location or "propose in a wildly creative fashion or on a meaningful day and place."⁶⁹

As is true of the wedding reception, the proposal has become more theatrical in the past two decades for several reasons. First, the event does not really represent the beginning of the marriage process as much as it does the end of the dating process, and as such, an end to (or decline in) the restaurants, roses, and concert or show tickets dating and courtship imply. Second, there is a crude economic calculus that operates; simply, all expensive wedding-related goods require increasingly theatrical gestures surrounding them. Third, lavishly romantic scenes from movies and advertising have incorporated the engagement process in their dramatizations of wedding luxury, along with the wedding itself. Gestures are supposed to be not merely romantic, but novel, nutty, and zany, injecting potentially staid and even stale occasions with "the illusion of rebelliousness" while discouraging true iconoclasm.⁷⁰

As a result, opulent and high-status props such as flowers, limousine rides, champagne, elaborate dinners, concerts, high-priced sporting events, and even foreign trips to romantic Tahiti or Paris are now standard elements of proposals. Women also often seem to expect these kinds of proposals and are often disappointed if a man “pops the question” in an ordinary or profane manner. One bride even described how her disappointment with her fiancé’s failure to utilize “the typical proposal days” of Christmas, New Year’s Eve, and Valentine’s Day—and his choice to propose on the living room floor on a Thursday evening—caused her to resent him for the first four years of their marriage.⁷¹

As some venues for proposals (such as romantic restaurants) have become cliché, proposals have become more expensive, and perhaps even outlandish, in order to help the presentation of the engagement ring remain magical and memorable and distinctive from the proposal narratives shared by others. Tales run rampant of prospective grooms dressing as knights in shining armor, proposing via the New York Yankees scoreboard, or burying “ancient” bottles containing proposals on beaches.⁷² And for those men who are “romantically challenged” or strapped for time, on-line services are available to orchestrate these events.⁷³

While not all brides experience magical and memorable proposals, most will participate in other sanctioned prenuptial rituals designed to affirm the social and commercial nature of the wedding, the female community surrounding the event, and the greater importance women typically attach to rituals. These include the bridesmaid’s luncheon, multiple bridal showers, the bachelorette party, and shopping trips for wedding-related goods. In fact, there is really only one “male-only” activity (the bachelor party), and a few optional events for the couple (the engagement party and perhaps a couples shower).

Assurances that the bride and groom would have enough possessions for their new household were typically made in the form of dowries (called “marriage portions”) until the early nineteenth century in America, and a little later in Europe.⁷⁴ After dowries disappeared, the custom of giving gifts to the couple spread to family members, and then by the 1880s, to family friends. Originally, gift giving provided the couple with necessities such as linens, pots, and bedding. But retailers in jewelry and department stores began to promote the more elaborate goods available, and they successfully touted silver, china, and crystal as symbols of

proper middle-class homes. Brides typically displayed these gifts on a white linen tablecloth in the dining room of their parents' home before the wedding, and sometimes on their wedding day as well.

One of the most prevalent mechanisms for giving wedding gifts was, and is, the bridal shower, which began in urban areas in the United States in the 1890s. From their beginnings, showers were designed to reinforce domestic roles. At these parties, neighbors provided brides with money and basic items for the kitchen or bedroom. Likewise, costumes and themes reminded women of their soon-to-be-prevalent household duties. At one kitchen shower in 1905, "the invitees dressed in aprons and cooks' caps and prepared the luncheon. . . . [A]t another . . . guests were requested to come 'dressed as spinsters' and bring their sewing."⁷⁵ Showers were named after Japanese parasols, "which, when opened, showered the bride with gifts. . . . [T]he shower was a female ritual, usually held at the home of a female friend or relative, which underscored the responsibility of the women's community in helping the bride acquire the necessary goods for homemaking."⁷⁶ However, even early showers did not completely exclude men: sometimes grooms attended and received gifts of "dustpans, aprons, brushes and household tools."⁷⁷

Showers in the United States thus began as mainly female parties among the urban upper middle class and made their way to rural areas by the 1930s. Etiquette books of the time observed that showers should be "purely spontaneous and informal, and should surprise the bride."⁷⁸ A 1937 magazine article described six types: kitchen, pantry, linen, electrical, glassware, and bathroom. Showers were intended both to furnish a home and to define a woman as cook, housewife, and sexual partner. For example, by 1948, one book contained thirty-five variants of the bridal shower, ranging from the more traditional kitchen and linen varieties to those focusing on specific types of items, such as books, records, soap, and handkerchiefs.⁷⁹ Even in the prim 1950s, the boudoir shower was also suggested as a sexual party theme. This was merely a new twist on the once-prevalent custom of displaying the bride's panties, bras, and nightgowns, often made out of silk or embroidered cotton, for other women to see and touch. One regional custom, not confined to immigrants, was to schedule this display of "the frilly things" about a week before the wedding at a tea hosted by the bride's best female friend.⁸⁰ In Canada, a more communal event, the "hall shower," emerged. Popular

among Ukrainians and immigrants from Italy, Malta, and Romania, it featured a rented hall, up to three hundred guests (all women), expensive gifts such as refrigerators, money collected at the door for the couple, and an unwrapping ceremony that usually lasted a few hours.⁸¹

Since their inception, bridal showers have typically followed a fixed format of events, with time set aside to enjoy specially prepared foods, games, and a formal gift-opening ceremony complete with a recording secretary who lists each giver and gift so the bride can write thank-you notes and record her gifts in her wedding memory album. With the decline in male guests at showers, the other rule of the event was to invite the bride's mother and female kin, her soon-to-be-acquired relatives, and her own female friends. Given the increasing number of guests invited to weddings, it became a matter of course that a bride would have not one but many showers. With the emphasis on proper hosting, party guides featured lengthy discussions of etiquette pertaining to invitations, foods, and "cornball" party games. The types of games seemed to correspond to the types of gifts expected. For example, a 1940s shower might feature "Name Your Beauty Aid," where guests matched products cut out of a magazine with their brand names. During "Pick Your Perfume," guests took turns guessing whether certain perfume samples were from dime stores or department stores.⁸² At the lingerie showers, the banter was blatantly sexual.

Nowadays it is common for guests (and even some brides-to-be) to confess to boredom with these events. They dislike playing childish games. Guests comment on the "strained politeness or reserved atmosphere" of the event. The shower assembles (largely female) friends and relatives from both sides without the liquor that lubricates interaction at the wedding reception. The most dissatisfied guests seem to be nontraditional women. One invitee in her twenties, who rarely cooked, was stymied by the hostess's request to bring her favorite recipe. Refusing to play along, she submitted instead the telephone number for Domino's pizza.⁸³ The satisfied guests are recent or future brides who recognize the reciprocal nature of gift giving and understand that when it is their turn, they will also "pick up loot" from all of the brides whose showers they had attended.⁸⁴

These days a minority of bridal showers might be coed events. Like the "stock the bar" showers that emerged in the 1980s, these parties typically

feature a gender-neutral theme.⁸⁵ Both the bride and the groom are present and the guests are not limited to women. The couple, rather than the bride, are made coequal guests of honor and the community being affirmed is a male and female one. Yet while some feminists praise the coed shower as an affirmation of more egalitarian household roles and intimacy between the couple, women sometimes tease the male guests about their lack of domestic skills, knowledge of the games, and gift-receipt norms, albeit in a good-natured manner.⁸⁶

Given that many women now have multiple bridal showers, it is not surprising the popularity of one mechanism fueling wedding gift giving—the bridal registry—has soared. Combining rationality and efficiency with wish fulfillment and desire, the registry systematically enables guests to find gifts for the couple. The registry is used as a guide to purchase gifts for the shower and the wedding; guests who attend showers are expected to give two sets of gifts, although the shower gift is usually thought of as less expensive than the wedding present. The idea of a bridal registry seems more impersonal and systematic than the earlier practice of brides attaching notes to the wedding invitation indicating the kind of goblets, bonbon dishes, and punch bowls they would like. The founder of *Bride's* is often credited with inventing the registry in the 1930s, since he promoted the idea with managers at Lenox China.⁸⁷ In truth, however, stores had begun using informal notations at the beginning of the twentieth century, asking brides to provide them with a list of gifts they wanted.

The first recorded instance of an in-store bridal registry was at China Hall in Rochester, Minnesota, in 1901. Herman Winkle, a clerk, began to list brides' names on index cards, along with the gifts they received and their preferred patterns.⁸⁸ Brides liked the idea of the registry, at least in part to increase the sets of glassware or china already selected. Because stores assumed men would not want to enter these “feminine” departments, clerks took orders from their male customers over the phone, selected a gift for them, and then sent them cards describing what the department store had sent on their behalf.⁸⁹

Advertising campaigns such as the one created by N. W. Ayer for Fostoria Glass Company in the 1920s fueled the desire for fine household items such as china and crystal. Fostoria encouraged women to buy large sets of china so they would have enough to always have a clean set for

entertaining. As such, the company “redefined dining traditions, presenting forty-two-piece luncheon sets as perfect accessories for the era of the servant shortage.”⁹⁰ By the mid-1930s, ads in bridal magazines were touting registries.⁹¹ With its initial emphasis on luxury goods, the registry reinforced the message that fine store-bought items such as linens, china, and crystal were *de rigueur* in order for the bride to be outfitted properly. In the 1950s, Amy Vanderbilt warned: “*If you don’t get your sterling now, you may never get it. [A family’s] constant needs absorb funds . . . so we ‘make-do’ over the years with ill-assorted cutlery. . . . [T]here is nothing that can be done about shabby flatware.*”⁹² An ad that ran in *Bride and Home* magazine in the early 1960s also made the connection between romance and wedding-related consumption abundantly clear. It depicted a bride raptly admiring her new china in her wedding gown and featured the headline “Another Romance Is Just Beginning.”⁹³

The message that wedding gifts should be somehow distinct from ordinary gifts also trickled down to potential wedding guests as well. Studies have shown consumers often compare more brands for wedding gifts than for other-occasion gifts, even when buying for close friends, and will also buy items with more features when buying wedding gifts.⁹⁴ Moreover, consumers rated the attributes “practical, high quality, and lasting” as more important when selecting wedding gifts than when selecting the same types of items for themselves and typically spent more on these types of gifts.⁹⁵ One study demonstrated that when purchasing a gift for a wedding, consumers seek out “risk-reducing” properties, such as statements about its performance on government-sponsored tests and a warranty. Givers also avoided products of poor quality, those that reflected a lack of thoughtfulness, or those that could be described as “gaudy.”⁹⁶

Obviously reflecting the increasing pervasiveness of the consumption ethic, the typical bridal registry has become increasingly elaborate. It is now so popular that almost 90 percent of *Bride’s* readers indicated they were planning to register in 1997, up from 60 percent in 1984. Moreover, more than half of brides who were recently surveyed indicated they were registering for crystal stemware, bed and bath linens, fine china, small appliances, cookware, stainless and sterling flatware, and table linens.⁹⁷ As the number of wedding gifts has increased (to an average of 171 in 1997), couples may want more control over the types of items they will

receive.⁹⁸ Guests now spend between \$60 and \$100 on gifts, and the bride and groom probably do not want to be stuck with unwanted expensive items.⁹⁹

But because some couples regard these luxury items as too cliché for their registries, and some want to make more distinctive statements about their identities to prospective wedding guests, brides and grooms have begun to supplement lists of these standard gifts with other items such as camping gear, tools, and stocks and bonds. Many of these innovations of the bridal registry have the added advantage of appealing primarily to men.¹⁰⁰ Although the “correct” places to register for most of the twentieth century were specialty and department stores, retailers such as Target and Home Depot, which want a share of the \$19 billion bridal gift market, now offer this service.¹⁰¹ These types of retail outlets are also popular among couples in which one member has already been married and has already traveled the traditional wedding registry route.¹⁰² A final twist to registering has been the changes brought about by the Internet. Couples now direct potential wedding guests to special Web sites where they can view wish lists containing everything from traditional items to Blockbuster video vouchers, stocks, mutual funds, frequent flier miles, down payments for a mortgage, and hiking treks to Nepal.

Travel agencies and tour operators have also jumped on the bandwagon and offer potential guests the ability to finance portions of the couple’s honeymoon. Some even provide discreetly worded cards for the couple to include with their invitations, providing directions as to how guests can contribute to the honeymoon fund.¹⁰³ For their six-week tour around the world, one Australian couple received a limousine tour of Singapore, a guided excursion in Santiago, and a night at a Cuzco monastery as wedding gifts.¹⁰⁴

Couples also now include desired gift lists or the location of their preferred on-line registries (of the more than five hundred from which to choose) inside their wedding invitations, a move that has etiquette experts reeling.¹⁰⁵ But in truth, brides specified the types of items they desired on their invitations in the early twentieth century, prior to the development of the registry. Moreover, while cash or checks have always been acceptable and welcome wedding gifts, even if the amount was discreetly hidden from view when gifts were displayed, couples now are more blatant about asking for money, and sometimes even suggest the

amount they would like to receive.¹⁰⁶ In short, the quest for magic, memories, romance, and perfection has made some couples (especially those who want their honeymoon or home down payment covered by their guests) more vocal in enrolling others to achieve their goals. Some brides, described as “aesthetic compulsives,” want only exorbitantly expensive or even one-of-a-kind items as gifts. As a result, some stores now allow guests to pool donations toward items such as limited-edition vases, Mies van der Rohe Barcelona chairs, or even commissioned sculptures.¹⁰⁷

Besides bridal showers, the engagement period may include two other types of parties. After waning in popularity for a few decades, the engagement party is reemerging as a lavish event among celebrities and East Coast society families. Emily Post observed in 1922 that the proper way for an engagement to be announced was for the family of the bride to host a small party. During the salad or dessert, the father of the bride would rise, announce the happy news, and toast the couple.¹⁰⁸ By the late 1940s, the need to have the “big news” announced by the family patriarch had diminished. Surprise engagement parties, where the bride announced her news to friends and family, came into vogue. Often she would disguise the news in a clever way, for example, by placing a miniature suitcase decorated with stickers from romantic travel destinations at each place setting at the party. When the guests opened their suitcases, they found an engagement announcement.¹⁰⁹

Compared to weddings, engagement parties are still relatively intimate affairs, with typically only family and a close circle of friends attending. As is true with rehearsal dinners, these parties have resisted the trend to become increasingly elaborate, except among the wealthiest families. We suspect several factors have contributed to the decline of engagement parties as the “proper” way to present the happy couple. First is the increasingly elaborate nature of the wedding reception, with its often-sumptuous meals, live music, and pressure for providing an open bar. Second, increasing geographic mobility in American society, as well as the rising ages at which couples marry, makes it more likely family and friends may not be able to attend an engagement party. If the couple lives far from the bride’s parents, her family members may in fact learn about the engagement after it has been announced to nearby friends. Finally, the engagement party is no longer a required mechanism through which the couple becomes legitimized in the eyes of family and friends, and the patriarchal

gesture of the father's toast has lost its meaning as the official legitimizing symbol for the engagement.

While engagement parties may remain relatively subdued, the one male-only event, the bachelor party, has taken the opposite direction. Once decidedly optional, it began among the elite as a sedate "bachelor dinner," with the groom and his friends solemnly toasting the bride and then smashing their champagne glasses in the fireplace at a men's club or private hotel dining room. In the 1930s, etiquette experts tried to minimize the potential for decadence by advising that the bachelor dinner should be "a dignified occasion, free of that rowdy spirit so abhorrent to refined men[;] . . . there is no reason for ribaldry and cheap jests."¹¹⁰ Somewhere after the 1950s, when the bachelor dinner became a common event among almost all social classes, it was transformed into a bachelor and then a "stag" party. The transition in both the language and activities at these parties coincided with the shift of the bachelor persona in American culture. From 1953 to the 1970s, *Playboy* publisher Hugh Hefner successfully reinvented the desired image of the American bachelor as a "successful, urbane, unfettered, and sexually conquering male."¹¹¹

Since the 1970s, the required elements of the bachelor party have included an all-male guest list, copious amounts of alcohol, pranks played on an inebriated groom, and the inevitable stripper. One goal is to thoroughly humiliate the groom and affirm a form of aggressive, joking, and even hostile masculinity. The primary means to do so is as follows. First, the stripper attempts to sexually excite the bachelor. Next, she disrobes him until he is naked in front of the other partygoers. He then becomes the subject of jokes and jeers, which symbolically represents his expulsion from the group and his readiness to enter into marriage in a humbled state.¹¹² The party extends into the night, but many brides insist it not be held the night before the wedding so hangovers or hijinks (such as kidnapping the groom and transporting him to a faraway city) do not mar their special day.

As is true with other aspects of the engagement and wedding, bachelor parties are becoming more elaborate. Some now involve travel to fancy resorts in or out of the country, where men spend time playing golf, skiing, riding horseback, and bonding, as well as tapping a keg of beer in anticipation of the still-mandatory stripper. Men justify these prolonged events as their last real time "with the boys," and it provides them with a

way to use both disposable income and frequent flier miles.¹¹³ In other words, although the engagement period is loaded with “female” activities, men seem to want a little magic of their own as well. With the growing equality of women, as well as female disenchantment with the “boring” shower, many female friends of the bride now provide her with a “bachelorette” evening that mimics the format of the groom’s night out. The bacchanalian night for the bride indicates women’s increasing sexual assertiveness. The evening includes an all-female guest list, copious amounts of alcohol, pranks played on an inebriated bride, and a male stripper. There is often “a racy scavenger hunt” in which a bride must ask men for condoms or their underwear. A drunken bride and her guests squealing at a man in a G-string appears deceptively similar to the event for men, but women guests seem to betray less hostility toward the bride because they sense that other women find aggressive joking “offensive.” Like the bachelor party, the female version occurs two or three nights before the wedding so that the bride “has some fun” before she returns to “getting ready” for the big event.¹¹⁴ The norm of perfection for the wedding also extends to planning the perfect bachelorette party. An executive at a company selling exotica for such parties indicated that women spent quadruple the amount on “lewd items” as did men.¹¹⁵

The current engagement rituals clearly are designed to reinforce the couple’s (and more so, the bride’s) belief that it is appropriate to expect one’s wedding to deliver a renewed romance with consumption, magic, perfection, and memories. The souvenirs of elaborate proposals, gifts, airline ticket stubs, and photographs make these experiences tangible and help contribute to the perception of the engagement as a magic, liminal time. But given the size and complexity of the contemporary wedding, engagements often involve as much work as play, especially for the bride and her mother. In the next chapter, we explore one key aspect of wedding planning, shopping for key artifacts.