

The Capital Exchanges in Marriages in Charlotte Bronte's Novels

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Abstract

Charlotte Bronte (1816-1855), being famous for her novel — *Jane Eyre*, is an outstanding British writer in the 19th century. By scrutinizing the marriages in Charlotte Bronte's novels with the method of textual analysis, this paper summarizes several marriage patterns, which implies the popular values for good matching and the exchange of human capital, social capital, economic capital and cultural capital in marriages. The author contends that the ideal marriage that the female writer longs for is also inseparable from the essence of exchange, which is actually a form of exchange between the cultural capital she holds and the economic and social capital in the hands of the aristocracy. As an intellectual woman of the middle and lower petty bourgeoisie, Charlotte yearns for greater exchange value in marriage with the development of society and the rising of the bourgeoisie.

Keywords: Charlotte Bronte, marriage, capital culture, capital exchange

1. Introduction

Marriage has always been a major event in one's life ever since ancient times. Marriage choice is both personal and social, reflecting not only personal preferences but also the distribution of social resources, and has an impact on the future individual opportunity mechanism and social structure. There are many factors influencing marriage choices, including population ratio, institutions, laws, customs and so on in the social level, and ascribed factors and achieved factors in the individual level. Ascribed factors include appearance, age, physical health, weight, birth, gender, race, family status, etc. Achieved factors refer to some acquired ability and resources, including educational background, personal occupation and income, work experience and ability and so on. These

factors can also be classified by capital types, roughly, human capital, social capital, economic capital and cultural capital, which constitute the marriage capital of individuals in marriage markets. Marital capital is the bargaining chip exchanged between the man and the woman in marriage and their family capital, and it is also key to maintain the stability and health of marriages. Marriage capital is affected by social factors as well, such as social institutions, customs and social resources distribution. Capital exchange runs through the whole process of marriage and is of great significance to the life and development of both the husband and the wife.

2. Marriage Exchange Theory and Capital Theory

German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858-1918) believes that all human interactions are based on the principle of equilibrium between pay and reward, so all communication behaviors between people can be regarded as exchange in essence¹. Exchange, a central concept in sociology, refers to the exchange of resources between two or more parties in an interaction.² “Marriage exchange theory”, developed on the basis of social exchange theory is used to explain the exchange behavior in the marriage relationship. The “marriage exchange theory” was first proposed in 1941 by Davis and Merton in the United States to analyze the possible racial and status exchanges between the black and the white in the United States. Since then, the theory has also been used to explain a variety of marriage exchange phenomena, such as the exchange between man’s work capacity and woman’s housework ability, and the exchange between social status and beauty³. In China, some scholars began to use social exchange theory to study the phenomenon of marriage in China, such as Xu Qi and Pan Xiuming’s research on the exchange of beauty and status in Chinese marriage, Zhang Yunxi’s *Marriage and Mate Selection from the Perspective of Social Exchange Theory and Social Mobility, Social Status and Marriage Exchange* by Xie Yu published in 2024.

The major target of exchange in marriage lies in resources, namely, marital capital. The word capital has a long history. What is capital? Adam Smith classifies all acquired and useful human abilities as capital, and this article will adopt this concept. The theory of capital was first systematically elaborated by Karl Marx in his *Economic Manuscripts* of 1857-58, which defined capital as the portion of surplus value that generates profits through production and exchange in a class-differentiated capitalist society⁴. Lin Nan, an American sociologist, called Marx’s theory of capital “classical theory of capital”, and the theory of human capital, cultural capital and social capital, which was later extended to social and cultural fields, was

called “new capital theory”⁵.

The cultural capital, proposed by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, mainly includes the individual’s education, taste, temperament and demeanor. “Cultural capital exists in the form of works, diplomas and degrees, and also in the form of degree systems”⁶. Economic capital is the most efficient form of capital and the most obvious form of exchange in society. Like economic capital, cultural capital and social capital are accumulative and reproducible, and the scale of capital is continuously expanded by means of circulation such as inheritance or exchange. In a particular social field, these three kinds of capital can be converted into each other to some extent, but the exchange form of cultural capital and social capital is more hidden than that of economic capital. And the concept of human capital is first proposed in 1960 at the annual meeting of the American Economic Association by American economist Theodore W. Schultz. The term refers to the value embedded in the workers themselves and capable of generating income, also known as “non-material capital”. To some degree, Bourdieu’s concepts of cultural capital and social capital overlap Schultz’ human capital. For example, a person’s education is both cultural and human capital, and the interpersonal relationship as social capital is also regarded as human capital. However, the concept of human capital is more inclusive. For example, beauty, a scarce resource, also belongs to the category of human resources. This paper mainly uses Bourdieu’s division of economic, cultural and social capital to explore the exchange of resources in the early Victorian marriages in Charlotte Bronte’s novels.

3. The Capital Exchange in Varied Types of Marriages in Charlotte Bronte’s Novels

Charlotte Bronte was born in a rural vicar’s family in northern England. She was one of the most prominent female novelists in the 19th century. During her short life, Charlotte wrote four novels: *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Shirley* (1849), *Villette* (1853) and *The Professor* (1857). Among them, the publication of *Jane Eyre* has caused a stir in the literary world and has the most

¹ Quoted from Peter Blau. (1988). *Exchange and Power in social Life*. Beijing: Huaxia Press, 1.

² Nan Lin. (2004). *Social Capital*. Translated by Zhang Lei. Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Publishing House, 145.

³ Quoted by Xu Qi, Pan Xiuming in the journal *Beauty and Status: Matching and Exchange in Chinese Marriage*. Society, 2021(6).

⁴ cf. Capital, Vol. II, Chapter 1.

⁵ Pei Yaqin and Zhang Yu. (2018). *An Analysis of the Social Attributes of the British Middle Class in the 19th Century*. Theoretical Guide, (07).

⁶ Zhao Yifan, Zhang Zhongzai. (2017). *Key Words of Western Literary Theory*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.

far-reaching influence, thus she is also known as the pioneer of feminism. The author's life experience and social class make her pay special attention to the self-realization of the personal value and marriage of the poor middle and lower educated women. In the novel, she describes the various marriages and choices of the middle and upper classes of society, which not only involves the author's observation and recognition of the social traditions and concepts at that time, but also her own expectations for marriage.

Bourdieu discusses the phenomenon of single people in France in his book *Le Bal des Celibataires*, pointing out that before 1914 there were strict rules for marriage choice and that in rural France, "marriage was the most important opportunity for economic exchange" and was closely related to the future of the family¹. The primary function of marriage was to sustain or elevate the family status without compromising the integrity of the family property. The same was true of the strictly regulated early Victorian marriage, which was essentially an exchange of capital and benefits under the rules of inheritance and male preference. We can use Bourdieu's marriage strategy to examine the early Victorian marriages. Marry-matching is like a game abiding by the rules of property inheritance system and male priority, the strategy of which lies in exchange. With the purpose to ensure the continuation of family assets and status, children are just like the poker cards in one's hand — sons are good cards, daughters are bad cards. The children who do not obey the family arrangement will be deprived of property inheritance like a deserted card, such as Jane Eyre's mother who was disowned by her family because she eloped to marry a middle-class businessman. Every marriage is a play of cards to ensure that the family maintains its status and wealth through the exchanges of capital.

Existing sociological studies identified two different mating patterns: Homogeneous marriage and heterogeneous mating². Homogeneous marriage refers to the marriage in which both men and women are matched in

marriage capital, that is, similar asset in human capital, economic capital, social capital and cultural capital owned by both parties, while heterogeneous marriage refers to the marriage in which the marriage capital owned by both parties is significantly different, where there is an exchange of the superior capital of one party for the superior capital of the other party. Applying this classification of homogeneous and heterogeneous marriages, this paper investigates several major marriage patterns in Charlotte Brontë's novels and the perspective potential marriage capital exchanges, trying to interpret the shared standards for good marriages in the early Victorian period.

3.1 Homogeneous Marriage: The Combination of the Powerful in the Same Class

Due to the homogeneity of social interaction and residential isolation in the 19th century, young men and women from alike family background were basically restricted to the same social circle, and the probability of homogeneous marriage is greater³. Homogeneous marriage is similar to the concept of traditional Chinese family pairs. Both parties involved in the marriage have a large sum of matching assets in terms of property and status. Marrying the same class or above is also an optimum choice for most families in the early Victorian period. Due to conventional division of property at that time, children often lacked autonomy in marriage choice, so the kind of marriage with third-party intervention was often a choice made by parents after weighing advantages and disadvantages. The marriage situations described in a novel closely are related to the age the novelist lives in. In Charlotte's novels, some marriages are praised because both the marriages are approved by their families, while other marriages in which someone married lower are not only blocked by the family, but also considered dishonorable by the society. Those young women who eloped for love, regardless of the disparity of status or wealth, usually lived a miserable life after marrying, such as William's mother in *The Professor*.

The type or total amount of marriage capital owned by the two parties in homogeneous marriages are similar, thus the capital can be maintained or even expanded through the

¹ Pierre Bourdieu. (2009). *Le Bal des Celibataires*. Translated by Jiang Zhihui. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 5.

² Schwartz, C. R. (2013). Trends and Variation in Assortative Mating: Causes and Consequences. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 39, 451-470.

³ Kalmijn, Matthijs. (1998). Inter-marriage and Homogamy: Causes, Patterns, Trends. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24, 395-421.

exchange and combination of marital capitals. This kind of marriage is an alliance and resources sharing between two families. A good example is the marriage of beautiful and tender Miss Rosamund Oliver and Mr. Granby in Jane Eyre. Granby, the grandson and heir of Sir Frederick, had a good social background and was respected, while Oliver came from a good wealthy family with a long history. Another instance is praised in *The Professor*. Mr. Pelet, the principal of the Brussels private school, and Mlle Reuter, the principal of the boarding girls' school, are also quite matched in property and status. Both were successful in running schools and were described by newspapers as "the happy pair"¹. It is likely that this was also a rational choice made by the two after their unsuccessful search for upward matching. In *Shirley*, Shirley refused the proposal of Baron Philip, but they are undoubtedly very compatible. Both of them are from upper-class—Shirley is the only heiress of the local famous family and Baron Philip has social status and wealth. Homogeneous marriage in Charlotte's novel reflects the early Victorian emphasis on status and wealth. "The logic of marriage exchange tends to preserve the social hierarchy and perpetuate it" while fulfilling the task of family continuity².

3.2 Heterogeneous Marriage: Advantaged Capitals of Both Parties Are Quite Different

In the early Victorian society, there were obvious social stratification. There were mainly the aristocracy, the middle class and the working class from the top to the bottom, and most marriages occurred in the same class. However, with the rising of the bourgeoisie after the Industrial Revolution, social class mobility also increased, and mixed marriages appeared accordingly. Although the marriage between similar families is still dominant, the reality often contradicts, there were also a lot of intermarriages between the aristocracy and the higher middle-class by the arrangement of family. In the intermarriages, the exchange of various kinds of capital is more obvious, from which we can have a glimpse to the change of popular values of early Victoria.

3.2.1 The Marriage between the Capitalist

Middle Class and the Land Aristocracy: The Exchange of Economic Capital and Social Capital

In Charlotte's works, the marriage between capitalists and aristocrats is often described. The marriage between Rochester and his mad wife in Jane Eyre is a typical case. Rochester, the second son of an aristocratic family, was arranged to marry the beautiful Miss Mason, the daughter of a West Indian planter, because his father did not want to divide the estate and Mason family offered a dowry of £30,000. Despite Rochester's lack of property, his origins made him popular in the marriage market. Rochester told Jane that "her (Mason) family was keen to capture me because I came from a good family"³. The marriage of William's brother Edward to the daughter of a factory owner in *The Professor* is similar. Edward's father was a merchant (who later went bankrupt), and his mother was an aristocrat. By virtue of his birth, looks and ability, Edward succeeded in marrying the daughter of a wealthy factory owner and inheriting the factory.

The marriage between the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie is a typical exchange of economic capital with social and cultural capital. The eldest son of a noble family inherited the family title and most of the assets, so Rochester, as the second son, was born a noble but lacked property. There was a marriage market among the British aristocracy in the 19th century "with a fairly flexible marriage price. A nobleman who descended to search for a spouse from a lower class may be financially compensated"⁴. The aristocratic Rochester family extended the olive branch of marriage to North America, where many wealthy North Americans were looking forward to elevate their social status through marriage and money. The Mason family were Jamaican plantation owners with strong assets in North America, and were willing to pay a huge dowry of 30,000 pounds for the aristocratic status of Rochester to enhance their family's social status and reputation. Raymond Williams, a British Marxist cultural theorist, believed that bourgeois values were dominant in the mid-19th century. "One's social status is determined by

¹ Charlotte Bronte. (2012). *The Professor*. Beijing: Chinese Translation Press, 159.

² Pierre Bourdieu. (2009). *Le Bal des Celibataires*. Translated by Jiang Zhihui. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 51.

³ Charlotte Bronte. (2015). *Jane Eyre*. Translated by Song Zhaolin. Beijing: China Federation of Literary and Cultural Publishing House, 159.

⁴ Yan Zhaoxiang. (2000). *A History of English Aristocracy*. Beijing: People Publishing House, 289-290.

money, not by birth”¹ was a popular belief, but birth still had an important influence. The new bourgeoisie had a large amount of economic capital, and they were eager to enter the aristocratic circle to obtain more social and cultural resources. Their ideal was to imitate the aristocratic lifestyle, whereas the declining aristocracy needed money. Through marriage, the bourgeoisie got the ticket to the nobility world while the nobility got the money, which is a good bargain for both sides.

3.2.2 The Marriage between a Beautiful Lady with a Small Dowry and a Rich Older Gentleman: The Exchange of Human Capital and Economic Capital

This kind of marriage was relatively common at the time. Jane Eyre's late uncle Reed had a certain reputation in the local area, but with his death, the family declined in wealth. With little dowry, his daughters' chances of marriage are slim. Fortunately, one of the daughter, Georgiana married a frail old rich man. However, the other daughter was not so lucky. The same pattern is found in *Villette*, where Lucy spotted the rich Watsons on the boat. The newlyweds were a beautiful young lady and a short, fat, vulgar older man, but the young bride is “happy and even frivolous” for such a marriage². Miss Ginevra's sister also married a rich old man, and they “all think she could not have lived a happier life”³. These young and beautiful ladies held the scarce human capital of beauty and youth, and their families had a certain social status to meet the minimum requirement.

If they had had a sizable dowry, they would have been highly prized in the marriage market. However, in reality, a large number of beautiful ladies lacked dowries. They had been educated and taught from childhood the skills to show their charm in order to secure a rich husband to make a good living. For example, Miss Ginevra was from a falling aristocratic family, in which the daughters were subsidized by relatives to go to school in the expectation to find a husband with good economic status. Although there is an exchange between economic capital and social capital in this marriage, it is mainly an exchange

between human capital such as youth and beauty and the economic capital of an old rich gentleman. The social status of these young ladies grants them the access to the marriage exchange with the wealthy bourgeoisie, and the scarce resource of beauty is their edge over other ladies. Without the blessing of family status, beauty can be useless, or even worse, a curse. It was naive for girls born and raised at the bottom of society to dream of achieving social class rising. Just think of the hard-working and beautiful country girl Tess in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'urbervilles*.

3.2.3 The Marriage between Cultural Middle Class and Aristocracy: The Exchange of Cultural Capital with Social and Economic Capital

The union of Polina and Dr. John in *Villette* is the result of M. De Basampier's trade-offs. The young countess Polina, sweet-tempered and cultured, is the only daughter of M. De Basampier. Countless young people in *Villette* are fascinated by her and her wealth and status. On the contrary, Dr. John is a handsome, well educated middle class with a certain social status and wealth, but his financial disadvantages were fatal compared with Polina's. For the protection of his only child, Mr. De Basampier accepted the faithful and knowledgeable Doctor John as his son-in-law.

In Victorian aristocratic families, the eldest son inherited the family title and most of the property, and in families without boys, the eldest daughter inherited most of the property and was responsible for carrying on the family name. Titles of nobility were usually inherited by men, but Monsieur De Basampier's title was inherited from abroad, so that Polina could inherit titles and property and pass them on to her children. Prior to the Marriage and Divorce Acts of 1857, married women were completely dependent on their husbands and had few property rights⁴. This meant that once Polina was married, her “person, wealth, her personality, her income, children, everything passed under the control of her husband through marriage—he could demand her sexual services at will, beat her or restrict her, the children belonged exclusively to the father”⁵.

¹ Zhao Yifan, Zhang Zhongzai. (2017). *Key Words of Western Literary Theory*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 434.

² Charlotte Bronte. (2000). *Villette*. Translated by Wu Juntao. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 56.

³ Ibid, 60.

⁴ Pan Yinghua. (2007). The Evolution of Legal Status of Women in Family of 19th Century England and the British Modernization in the 19th Century. *World History*, (2007-6), 4-13.

⁵ Robert. B. Shoemaker. (1998). *Gender in English Society 1650-1850*. Longman, 6.

Polina is an innocent “lamb” to her father, and Lucy the narrator also describes her as “a seven-year-old girl living in the body of a seventeen-year-old girl”¹, showing her simplicity of heart and mind. Monsieur de Basampier frets, “What am I going to do with my daughter or daughter? She grew neither wisdom nor height”². After John proposed to Polina, he said “May God treat you as you treated her”. It can be seen that he knew that his daughter, with a large fortune and a high social status would be rendered vulnerable once she married the wrong person, so Dr. John’s loyalty and reliability became the greatest advantage in the eyes of a father who adores the daughter. Although the De Basampier family fortune could not be expanded directly through the marriage, it would be sustained through well management of John, the deliberately-chosen and qualified agent, and most importantly, Polina would be well protected. In this union, Dr. John’s character, education and upbringing became important capitals for marriage exchange. The cultural capital of personal knowledge and virtue successfully exchanged with the social and economic capital of the noble de Basampierre. By marriage, John’s descendants will have noble titles and wealth.

The same kind of marriage exchange also exists in the so-called equal marriage advocated by the writer in her works, such as the marriage of the hero and heroine in *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*. Although Jane Eyre obtained a decent sum of economic capital by inheriting accidentally from her uncle, her greatest marital capital lies in her cultural capital, such as wisdom, good education, and integrity. The same is true for Louise Moore, the learned private teacher. Shirley was attracted by Moore’s wide range of knowledge and formed an intimate relationship with him. However, it should be noted that the marriage of the aristocratic heirs like Rochester and Shirley with the middle and lower petty bourgeoisie was difficult to be acknowledged at that time, and the gap between the two parties in social status and financial wealth was too huge to make it true in Britain in the 19th century. It’s no surprise that when Jane told the servant the news of her marriage, “Mary looked at me with wide eyes, and the spoon with which she was pouring oil on the two chickens roasting

on the fire did stop in the air for a full three minutes, and John’s knives did stop wiping for the same length of time”³. Both came from clerical families, Jane and Louis had no advantages in social status or property, and thus no superior capital to exchange with the great aristocracy, so such marriage unions could only exist in the fantasy of the novelists. In fact, the British aristocracy at all levels valued their property and status so much that neither men nor women would choose downward compatibility in marriage unless they had no chance to climb the social ladder or find someone with similar social status. Although the land aristocracy were declining in wealth with the rapid development of capitalism, only 3% of men married the daughters of wealthy merchants throughout the 18th century, and this was still the case in the 19th century. It was only in the 20th century that some aristocrats came to terms with the reality to marry the rich civilians, but the preferred partners were wealthy merchants and bankers. They were especially reluctant to marry families who were engaged in humble living⁴.

With the increasing degree of social modernization and the rise of the status of the bourgeoisie, the importance of cultural capital has become increasingly prominent, and it has become a vital means for the middle and lower classes in society to jump up. For example, capitalists will find ways to improve cultural taste, because “the exquisite taste of the upper class itself contains a large amount of cultural capital” is a sign of social differentiation⁵. In addition to the inheritance of cultural capital through the family, education has also become another important way to acquire cultural capital. However, back then in the 19th century, there were too few opportunities to transform cultural capital, such as education, into economic capital, and the situation for women were worse, because they were expected to stay at home to be house angels and were excluded from the public professions, such as business, law, and politics. For middle-class female intellectuals like Bronte sisters, a good education

¹ Charlotte Bronte. *Villette*. (2000). Translated by Wu Juntao. Shanghai: Shanghai Translation Publishing House, 331.

² Ibid, 328.

³ Charlotte Bronte. (2015). *Jane Eyre*. Translated by Song Zhaolin. Beijing: China Federation of Literary and Cultural Publishing House, 205.

⁴ Yan Zhaoxiang. (2000). *A History of the English Aristocracy*. Beijing: People Publishing House, 288-289.

⁵ Zhao Yifan, Zhang Zhongzai. (2017). *Key Words of Western Literary Theory*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 573-575.

could only bring a career path to be a tutor or a girls' boarding school teacher, but these occupations were low both in income and social status, thus bringing scarce marriage capital to enhance their social status. Jane Eyre's Cinderella story was just a self-consolation for the petty-bourgeois intellectuals who had no access to the higher society.

4. Conclusion

Through the study of several types of marriages described in Charlotte Bronte's novels, we find the four well-matched marriage patterns in early Victoria—the combination of the powerful from the same class; between the capitalist middle class and the land aristocracy; between a beautiful young lady with a small dowry and a rich elder gentleman; between cultural middle class and aristocracy. All the marital patterns are dominated by potential exchanges of capitals. Families of all social classes communicated and interacted with each other through marriage, and the essence of marriage is the capital exchange for the purpose of accumulation of fortune and expansion in social space. In the game of marriage, we can see various capital interaction between two parties. As a person who identifies with the values of the middle class, the equal marriage described by the writer seemed to challenge the traditional way of class differentiation at the first glance, but in essence, it is just an exchange strategy—the intellectual women of the lower petty bourgeoisie are eager to exchange their cultural capital for social and economic capital through marriage.

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