

What if marriage were temporary? – Quartz

In Jonathan Swift's 1726 classic *Gulliver's Travels*, he describes a race of people, the Struldburghs, who are afflicted with the pesky inconvenience of immortality. If two Struldburghs are to marry each other, "of course" the marriage is dissolved, by courtesy of the kingdom, as soon as the younger partner hits 80, "for the law thinks it a reasonable indulgence, that those who are condemned...to a perpetual continuance in the world, should not have their misery doubled by the load of a wife."

While some of Swift's satirical propositions are agelessly absurd (the most obvious being "A Modest Proposal" and its bid for cannibalism), the idea of a marriage with an expiration date seems somehow prescient. With the divorce rate hovering between 40 and 50 percent, one could argue half of marriages are temporary, anyway. In a development that proves even more canny for Mr. Swift, [a recent study](#) has shown the "gray divorce" rate (the divorce rate among couples over 50) has doubled since 1990. With these facts in front of us, could we make the case the idea of a time-sensitive marriage has morphed from a bitter joke into a viable option for modern couples?

Before one dismisses temporary matrimony as a lunatic thought experiment, it should be noted that the concept of temporary marriage has been around for millennia. Most notably, the controversial Shia practice of Mut'a, or "pleasure marriage" allows for a marriage to be dissolved upon an agreed-upon date. (The marriage contract could last years, days or even minutes.) According to Boston University Professor Shala Haeri, in her book *Law of Desire: Temporary Marriage in Shi'i Iran*, *nika mut'ah* "is a pre-Islamic tradition of Arabia" still practiced by a minority of Shiite Muslims.

In extremely conservative religious communities, temporary marriage allows for a man and woman to date or have sex without the commitment of permanence. (In other circumstances, it also would allow a woman and man to live or work together in close quarters.) With a temporary marriage contract, the couple can be together and still remain well within the eyes of the law. However, opponents of the practice assert that in certain Muslim communities, where a woman's virginity is considered a huge asset, temporary marriage renders women unlikely to find a permanent husband.

RELATED STORY



Marriage Is Not a '24/7 Sleepover Party'

In a Western example, the world took notice in 2011 when, in the name of lowering divorce rates, lawmakers in Mexico City proposed a bill that would allow marriages to expire after two years. Once their contract dissolved, they would be given the option of either cementing their vows for life or terminating their bond, minus the messy hassle. "You wouldn't have to go through the messy hassle of divorce," said Leonel Luna, a Mexico City assemblyman and co-author of the bill, told Reuters at the time. Not completely surprisingly, the bill didn't make much legislative headway.

North American experts agree the practice would have just as little chance of survival stateside as well. According to Stephanie Coontz, professor and author of *A Strange Stirring: The Feminine Mystique and American Women at the Dawn of the 1960s*, temporary marriage would have a hard time gaining footing because, ironically, marriage already doesn't mean the kind of commitment it used to.

"In modern society, people are reluctant to enter marriages unless they know they can get out," she says. "That's probably solved already by the availability of no-fault divorce."

Andrew Christensen, couples' psychiatrist and professor at UCLA, agrees, saying that pre-marital cohabitation offers another kind of "temporary marriage." Couples "have already experienced sexual intimacy and daily living before making the marriage commitment."

Additionally, "Since there is very little stigma against living together, it seems to me that the notion of marriage with an expiration date is not needed."

But what about the notion of a temporary marriage acting as a "renewable lease," which would motivate partners to work harder to please their spouses? As unromantic as treating one's husband or wife like a Rent-a-Car might be, perhaps the knowledge that he or she could always slip away, no strings attached, would help cultivate more rewarding relationships.

Not so, says Coontz. "I think it's plausible some couples would find this an incentive to renegotiate, but others might find it an easy out."

As a young woman at the age when my friends are starting to get engaged, I've been thinking about marriage more than I ever have before. But I have never once entertained the possibility of one that wasn't permanent. Part of it is pride, I guess. If a man got down on one knee and asked "Will you marry me...for two years?" I don't know if I would laugh or cry. Either way, I wouldn't say "I do" to a man who only thought I was worth marrying for two years.

America's high divorce rate speaks for itself. I'm aware that when I get married, there's a chance it won't work out. But that's not what I want to tell myself if and when I decide to become someone's wife. As a child in elementary school, around the same time my sister and I were photographed in matching "bride" Halloween costumes, I had a teacher who was fond of telling my class "ignorance is bliss." When it comes to the possibility of a marriage failing, I prefer to pull the white tulle over my eyes. I'm aware that people, not a contract, make marriage permanent, but when I walk down the aisle, I want to believe, in my heart of hearts, mine will last forever.

This originally appeared on [The Atlantic](#). Also on our sister site:

[The decline of marriage and the rise of unwed mothers](#)

[The many lawsuits of Donald Trump](#)

[Spouses shouldn't even try to split chores evenly](#)