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Marriage in Ruins: *Broadchurch*

Though Tolstoy was not an epigrammatic writer, the opening words of *Anna Karenina* live on like a saying: “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” A bad marriage becomes a drama, complete with clashing words, complications, over-acting, hurled crockery; being an involved story it achieves a certain uniqueness, and being dramatic it lends itself to fictional portrayal more readily than the comparative tranquility of happiness. The latter distinction is in the spirit of Plato’s judgment that artists are drawn to “what is base and complex” in preference to “what is simple and good” (in the words of Iris Murdoch).¹ Ironically, *Anna Karenina* itself is usually read as if adultery were more compelling and authentic than simple fidelity.

Written into much of the television drama that Britain exports to the world is a fascination with marital instability that echoes this inverted reading of Tolstoy. In the dramas I have in mind the broken marriage seems to have become a norm, and adultery, while perhaps serious, isn’t positively scandalous. Along with the sheer frequency of break-ups in these fictional worlds, along with the paradox of a foundational institution in ruins, goes a sort of implication that a harmonious family is a fiction. According to Tolstoy’s aphorism, both happy and unhappy families exist. Many a script today seems to say, *We know better*.

Not only the attractions of adultery and the ubiquity of divorce but the falsity of the marital ideal are on display in an exceptionally strong dramatic series set near the magnificent cliffs of Dorset: *Broadchurch*.

Season 1 of *Broadchurch* follows the investigation of the murder of 11-year-old Danny Latimer, whose body is found on a beach near the town in the first episode. At the center of the story is the Latimer family, struck hard by its loss; not far from the center are their friends and neighbors the Millers, with DS Ellie Miller (a wonderfully sympathetic figure) conducting the investigation of the murder under the direction of DI Alec Hardy. In the last episode the killer of Danny Latimer is revealed to be none other than Joe Miller, the investigator's husband, who has been hiding in front of our eyes, a picture of normality, from the beginning.

Season 2 opens with defendant Joe Miller stunning the courtroom and his own barrister by pleading innocent. Throughout the ensuing trial the truth takes a beating, with Miller's lawyer scoring legal points, discrediting the police, and more than suggesting that the murderer was actually Danny's own father, Mark Latimer. To complete this moral disaster, Joe Miller is acquitted. Concurrently, the story follows DI Hardy and DS Miller as they investigate a double murder in Sandbrook committed some time before events in Broadchurch, a horror that became a scandal when the case against the accused broke down owing to the loss of a key piece of evidence, allegedly as a result of Hardy's negligence. The solution to the Sandbrook murders turns out to be intricate, like a key with an unusual cut; suffice it to say that a husband, his wife and a neighbor (the latter two sometime lovers, apparently) each had a hand in the murders, with two marriages destroyed as a result.

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As if something corresponding to the erosive power responsible for the Dorset cliffs were at work in the human realm, ruined marriages are everywhere in *Broadchurch*—deformations of the human landscape. The instant Ellie recognizes that her husband killed Danny Latimer, her marriage is annihilated. Ellie's sister seems to have raised her son by herself, as does the barrister who gets Joe Miller off. The mysterious solitary whose son is now Mark Latimer's right-hand man went her own way years before, when her husband was arrested for the rape and murder of their daughter. The newsagent on whom the town's suspicions fall is divorced. DI Hardy's marriage is rubble. Much of this breakage adds nothing in particular to *Broadchurch*; its presence seems obligatory, as if the writer were upholding a norm or fostering a general impression of unsparing realism. Credibility seems to require the portrayal of marriage as a disintegrating institution. The exception that proves the rule is the marriage at the center of the series, the Latimers', which is shaken by events but survives. Even in an earthquake a few structures are left standing.²

Though so much ruin and wreckage seems intended to give *Broadchurch* an air of the believable (as if the script had done away with the idealizations through which we see the world), there is something too much of this, and in one critically important case the representation of adultery as the subtext of marriage strains credibility severely. The script would have us believe that at the time Danny Latimer was killed in a summer house at the seaside, his father happened to be in a parked car with the local beauty Becca Fisher *fifty yards away*, concluding his very first evening of infidelity. This cosmic coincidence casts a long

shadow in *Broadchurch*, with the defense arguing in Season 2 that Mark Latimer himself committed the murder because Danny witnessed his tryst. Possibly it's because the jurors believe Mark Latimer killed his own child, or at least might have done so, that they acquit the actual murderer. It's a comment on the reputation of the family as an institution in *Broadchurch* that an unthinkable act of filicide becomes a scenario plausible enough to be entertained in a court of law. (After all, Susan Wright's husband or ex-husband *did* murder their daughter.) Over the course of the series the whereabouts of all parties on the night of the murder become so fateful that we forget that Mark Latimer's presence with his lover at the very scene of the crime, at the very moment of the crime, was rigged in order to place adultery at the center of events.

Adultery acquires the same sort of artificially fateful significance in the story underlying the infamous failure of the Sandbrook prosecution. As it happens, it wasn't DI Hardy who lost the pendant of one of the murdered girls; it was his wife, also a detective, who improbably left it in her car when she stopped on the way to the police station to snuggle with her lover at a local hotel. One of the culprits promptly breaks into the car and makes off with the incriminating item. (In a remarkable act of loyalty, DI Hardy covers for his wife, taking the blame for the loss of the pendant and the collapse of the prosecution's case. This action appears to make little impression on her.) While perhaps less incredible than the coincidence that places Mark Latimer feet away from the scene of the murder of his son, the loss of a critical piece of evidence to an act of adultery also strains belief and also betrays heavy-handed plotting. In any case, adultery is too commonplace in the *Broadchurch* world to bear any great significance. No viewer of *Broadchurch* will be even mildly surprised to learn that one of the

Sandbrook murderers, a married man, carries a flask of the date-rape drug Rohypnol. Nor, perhaps, is anyone but Ellie Miller appalled by the defense's allegation that she and DI Hardy had a fling while investigating the murder of Danny Latimer.

Maybe the unkindest cut in *Broadchurch* is its portrayal of the conventional happiness of the Miller household as a perfect lie. As Season 1 opens, DS Miller has just returned from a stereotypical family vacation in Florida; as it closes, she explodes in a physical fury at the arrested child-murderer who is also her husband, thereby throwing his confession into legal jeopardy and, as it turns out, fatally weakening the prosecution's case. In retrospect, even in Florida the Miller marriage was a falsehood—not an ordinary one like a lie to the police, but one so profound that Ellie herself had no notion of it even while living it. This is the insidious falsehood of *inauthenticity*, a poison that especially infects the seemingly normal. Ellie can truthfully say that she, a detective, saw no sign whatever that her husband was a probable pedophile. Necessarily, the benign normality of her domestic life, of which we get glimpses during Season 1, makes us view normality itself with suspicion. ("*Suspect everyone*," DI Hardy tells DS Miller during the investigation, little knowing how true his words will prove.) The Tolstoyan norm of the unremarkably happy family is simply a wretched family in waiting.

DS Miller's inability to perceive the falsity of her marriage until it's too late takes on even greater irony when she herself doubts a suspect's claim that she saw nothing amiss in her household even while her husband preyed sexually on their daughter. The suspect is the mysterious recluse Susan Wright, the mother of Nigel Carter, from whom he was removed at birth. The story of the sexual abuse of Nigel's sister is given in the most cursory manner, as if it

served solely to magnify the irony of Ellie's blindness. In the script of *Broadchurch* it's a throwaway detail, lost in the tide of familial destruction.

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In a characteristic essay published in 1946, Orwell laments the degeneration of the English murder from the high standards it once observed. Drawing on the particulars of a number of cases that linger in public memory like exemplars, he suggests that the ideal murder should be committed by an "intensely respectable" figure who plans the crime with care and carries it out under great duress of conscience, lest his or her guilty secret come to light. The classical murder therefore presupposes norms of respectability that are enforced in detail—norms in turn rooted in a world much more stable and indeed parochial than that of Britain in 1946.

By Orwell's standards, the murder of Danny Latimer is a complete shambles, beginning with the fact that it is committed without forethought, in the confusion of the moment, and in the most primitive manner—with the killer's own hands. The polished murderer, according to Orwell, uses poison. In only one respect does the murder of Danny Latimer measure up: Joe Miller does the deed to keep his secret (though evidently chaste) passion for the boy from becoming known to the world. But the motives actuating Orwell's ideal crime are of a different order entirely. "In the last analysis [the criminal] should commit murder because this seems to him less disgraceful, and less damaging to his career, than being detected in adultery."³

In *Broadchurch* the fiction that Mark Latimer murdered the son who detected him in adultery is concocted by a cynical barrister who doesn't believe it for a minute but knows that at least it can divert suspicion from her client. While the ploy appears to work, it's not as if disgrace attached to adultery in the society portrayed in *Broadchurch*. At one point in Season 1 a colleague casually asks DS Miller for a date, knowing full well that she's married. DI Hardy takes the blame for the loss of the pendant not to spare his then-wife the grief of public exposure but to save her career. The banality of adultery in *Broadchurch* is as far from the crime it once was as the impulsive strangling of Danny Latimer is from the calculated use of poison. The deployment of adultery at certain critical points in *Broadchurch* represents, it seems, an awkward attempt to give it plot importance now that its actual importance has evaporated.

¹ Iris Murdoch, *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Penguin, 1997), p. 391.

² In the following season of *Broadchurch*, all marriages are in ruins, including that of Beth and Mark Latimer.

³ George Orwell, "Decline of the English Murder," in *In Front of Your Nose*; vol. 4 of *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, eds. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1968), p. 100.