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(Wedding Rings)**

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Television Divorce in Post-Franco Spain: *Anillos de oro* (*Wedding Rings*)

ANJA LOUIS

I. Introduction

The transition from dictatorship to democracy in Spain was a time of unprecedented social change. Given the reluctance of the old guard to cede power, the interim period between General Franco's death in 1975 and the Socialist Party's (PSOE) election victory in 1982 was a time of extreme social tension. The process of democratisation rested very much on the shoulders of a new generation, where young and innocent lawyers (or not so young, but politically above suspicion) were called upon to participate in—and construct—democracy. What better way to celebrate 'hero lawyers'¹ than with a series set in one of the most challenging times of recent Spanish history, in which democracy was in the making and law was instrumental, both real and imagined, in major social changes of the time. The Constitution of 1978 proclaimed democratic principles after almost 40 years of dictatorship; in 1981 the Divorce Law allowed full dissolution of marriage rather than judicial separation. This groundbreaking new law exacerbated tensions between the Catholic Church and the state, becoming the focus of a wide-ranging public and parliamentary debate. The television show *Wedding Rings*² (1983) convincingly captures these social tensions. The series tells the story of two 'hero lawyers', Lola Martínez Luque (Ana Diosdado) and Ramón San Juan (Imanol Arias), describing them as personifications of progress who create a law firm together to specialise in divorce cases. Each episode deals with a particular divorce case, and each narrative guides the viewer through the social reality and change that

¹ The term 'hero lawyer' is used to refer to an archetypal hero and honourable lawyer as a representative of justice and social change.

² The series was called *Anillos de oro* in its original form, which literally means golden rings. In this chapter it will be referred to as *Wedding Rings* to capture the clear reference to weddings and wedding rings in the opening credits of the series.

the Divorce Law created within the country. It might seem odd that the 13 episodes of this highly acclaimed and award-winning television show³ set during the time of the Spanish transition should concentrate solely on the issue of divorce, and odder still is the fact that most episodes do not actually end in divorce. The mostly conservative endings, however, attest to the anxiety about the supposed breakdown of marriage and its consequences for the family as the basis of society.

Wedding Rings can be read as a careful mediation between the opposing factions of the old and new Spain. Not only was the series an emblematic representation of Spain's transition to democracy, but the series also captured the public imagination.⁴ The series made both main actors famous nearly overnight, especially Imanol Arias, who became the heartthrob of his generation (and the imaginary son-in-law the older generation of Spain would love to have). One element of the series' success could have been the long list of prestigious actors who guest-starred, such as Hector Alterio, José Bódalo, Alberto Closas, Juan Luis Galiardo, and María Luisa Ponte. These actors and actresses' stunning performances have become part of popular memory, and it is no coincidence that the best-scripted episodes star at least one of these actors or actresses. The Spanish film director and film critic José Luis Garci hailed *Wedding Rings* as a masterpiece of television, declaring that both Ana Diosdado's script and Pedro Masó's direction had a certain 'street smell', or rather authentically represented the lived experiences during Spain's transition. The obvious social relevance of *Wedding Rings* testifies to its closeness to contemporary Spanish audiences. In his introduction to Ana Diosdado's script, Garci assured her that the series had been 'democratically declared of public interest by the audience'.⁵ Pedro Masó, the series' director, confessed that everyone involved with the series was quite surprised at the great success of *Wedding Rings*, and gave credit for the success to Arias's versatile talent. Arias noted '[i]n those days it was considered a very progressive series'. Arias also acknowledged that 'having the scriptwriter [Ana Diosdado] on set meant we couldn't easily get away with changing the script when we had problems filming something'.⁶ The series' incredible success quickly expanded to Latin American countries such as Cuba and Argentina, while at home women's magazines celebrated 'Arias fever'.⁷ Arias himself acknowledged that he did not appear as much in the series as people remember, instead appearing no more than three times per episode on average. Alvares attributed the series' success partly to the social impact of the general phenomenon of TV series at the time; this is an interesting observation to make, especially if compared

³ See L Díaz, *La televisión en España [Television in Spain], 1949–1995* (Madrid, Alianza, 1994).

⁴ See also comments on YouTube.com, for eg at www.youtube.com/watch?v=aFwChmQq5Zk&feature=PlayList&p=704086904D83F8B1&playnext=1&index=8, for more anecdotal evidence of viewers' nostalgia.

⁵ JL Garci, 'Introduction' in A Diosdado (ed), *Anillos de oro [Wedding Rings]* (Madrid, Espasa-Calpe, 1985) 19–20. Garci himself directed one of the emblematic films of the Transition, *Asignatura pendiente [Unfinished Business]*, a love story about a generation who lived through socially and politically ambiguous times.

⁶ R Alvares, *Imanol Arias* (Barcelona, Belacqva, 2003) 198–99. See also Díaz, *La televisión en España* (n 3) 249, where he gives details about Diosdado's prior work as a scriptwriter for Spanish national television. Her breakthrough is undoubtedly due to *Wedding Rings*.

⁷ Alvares, *Imanol Arias* (n 6) 198–99.

to today's public attitude to television, most aptly summarised in the common label of *telebasa* (or tele-rubbish).⁸

Implicit in the huge success of *Wedding Rings* was a broader socio-political context that was evoked. The opening credits of the DVD explain that the television series is an essential point of reference for those interested in viewing an 'historic document' of the Spanish transition. Apart from the obvious social anxiety regarding the restructuring of Spanish society and the construction of democracy, *Wedding Rings* also convincingly captured two generations that lived through politically challenging times, and examined how their convictions on everyday issues (such as marriage and divorce) clashed with startling regularity.

II. Historical Background

The transition also included one of the most infamous attacks on lawyers' lives in Spanish legal history: the assassination of the so-called 'Attorneys of Atocha'. On 24 January 1977, two right-wing extremists entered the Atocha Street office of a group of labour law attorneys in Madrid and opened fire, killing five and wounding four. The massacre earned public indignation as a direct attack on the figure of the lawyer as someone who was instrumental in the application of democratic values—and also the process of democratisation itself—and, as a result, it is commemorated to this very day.⁹ The original viewers of *Wedding Rings* would have watched the show against this historical backdrop and it is no coincidence that Ramón's hero status is re-enforced by the fact that he is both a labour and divorce attorney, the epitome of hero lawyers in post-Franco Spain.

It might be appropriate here to give a historical overview of the Spanish divorce laws. As early as 1932, Spain boasted one of the most modern divorce laws in Europe, as a result of the proclamation of the Second Republic in 1931 and its political commitment to equality. These laws provided for the dissolution of marriage by mutual consent without any further precondition. Predictably, this law was also the first one to be repealed in 1938, even prior to the end of the Spanish Civil War. More than 40 years later, divorce was again a yardstick for the new democracy that tried to bring Spanish divorce legislation in line with other European countries (France 1975,

⁸ See *Ibid* 199, where she adds that once the Arias fever had started, Masó cashed in on it with another very successful series called *Brigada Central* [Central Brigade] in which Arias plays a Spanish version of Dirty Harry. See also PJ Smith, *Contemporary Spanish Culture* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2003) 14, where he explains that television is generally scorned by Spaniards themselves despite the fact that Spain is one of the biggest producers of series drama in Europe, overtaking France and Germany, while also selling original formats abroad.

⁹ In 2003 a monument was erected on Madrid's Plaza Antón Martín, near the Atocha Street office. Its plaque reads as follows: 'On January 24, 1977, in a labour law firm that was located at number 55 on Atocha Street, four lawyers and a trade unionist were killed and four more lawyers were injured. All were members of the PCE [Spanish Communist Party] and CCOO [Workers' Union]. This monument reproduces the sculpture of Juan Genovés known as "El Abrazo" [The Hug], a symbol of the restoration of freedom. It was opened by the City Council of Madrid on June 10, 2003, as a tribute to those who died in that office. It is a tribute to those who died for freedom in Spain.' For Juan Genovés's sculptures, see also www.juangenoves.com/en/work/sculptures/sculptures.html.

Germany 1976, Italy 1975).¹⁰ The debate—at least in its parliamentary form—was not so much about divorce per se, but rather about the scope and extent of the new legislation. While the political left pressed for legislation similar to that of 1932, the political centre and right-wing parties were unsurprisingly conservative in their approach to family law. Unlike the 1932 Divorce Law that permitted immediate divorce, the 1981 Divorce Law imposed waiting periods of varying length. This law nearly always required the proceedings for judicial separation to precede those for the dissolution of marriage. According to Glos, the law thus imposed on the parties an ‘unnecessary hurdle of duplicated proceedings. The duplication involves time, effort and expense on the part of the parties, and unnecessary clogging of court calendars and expense on the part of the courts.’¹¹ The Spanish legislature clearly hoped that compliance with these formalities would prevent hasty divorces in a final attempt to keep families together and prevent speedy marriages to third parties.

The Union of the Democratic Centre (UCD), the ruling political party in Spain at the time, struggled against the considerable anti-divorce sentiment of a large segment of its membership. Before the constitutional referendum of 6 December 1977, the Prime Minister at the time, Adolfo Suárez, categorically declared that ‘the constitution is not pro-divorce’,¹² in an attempt to assuage the conservative quarters’ fears of ‘a liberal revolution’. After lengthy debates in both parliament and the Judiciary Committee, two issues remained unresolved: first, the mutual consent clause (and following from that the question of fault or no-fault divorce); and second, the so-called *cláusula de dureza* (severity clause) in which the judge would be allowed to use his discretion to decide particularly difficult cases and deny a divorce altogether. Predictably, the Socialist Workers’ Party (PSOE) and the Communist Party (PCE) favoured a no-fault divorce system, while the Democratic Coalition (CD) and the Union of the Democratic Centre (UCD) opposed this. The proposed no-fault divorce system produced heated debates between parties, but also considerable disagreement amongst the governing UCD parliamentary members, which culminated in some members breaking party discipline and voting against their own party in the final vote on 22 June 1981.

Regardless of this protracted political debate, the Divorce Law of 1981 came into force as a law that failed to include a mutual consent clause; it would take until 2005 before Spain reformed the Divorce Law to include a no-fault divorce provision.¹³

¹⁰ See also GE Glos, ‘The Spanish Divorce Law of 1981’ (1983) 3 *International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, 688, where he adds that: ‘The new concept of *civil* marriage in Spain might have been as important a change as the reintroduction of divorce. Civil marriage legislation was first enacted during the Second Republic in 1932, but it lasted only until its repeal in 1938. [...] It has abolished the virtual monopoly of the Catholic Church over marriages in that it gives the parties, including Catholics, the choice of entering into a civil marriage before an officer of state or into a religious marriage before a minister of any recognised religion. The law thus expresses the democratic approach to the issue by stressing the element of choice the parties have in entering into a marriage.’

¹¹ *Ibid* 680–81.

¹² Adolfo Suárez declared it on television. For printed evidence, see the letter to the editor by Manuela Gil Alonso entitled ‘El ataque a la familia’ [Attacking the family], in the Madrid daily *ABC*, 11 July 1980.

¹³ For an interesting article on divorce rates in Europe, see L González and TK Viitanen, ‘The Effect of Divorce Laws on Divorce Rates in Europe’ (2006) *European Economic Review* 53.2, 127–38, in which they analyse the increase in divorce rates between 1950 and 2003. See also AB Jones, *Women in Contemporary Spain* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1997) 91, where she states that: ‘Owing to pent-up

The public debate during the time of the law's initial passage was equally intense as the political debate, and a cursory look at the headlines at that time, describes the emotive content. For instance, on 19 October 1980, the ultra-conservative newspaper *ABC* gave an overview of the divorce laws of other countries; the headlines read as follows: 'One in Two [Divorces] in the States, One in Three in the USSR'; 'Belgium, by Mutual Consent after Six Months'; 'Sweden, Denmark and Norway, Quick Access to Divorce'; 'In Italy there's a Distinction between Religious and Civil Marriage'; 'Portugal Allows Mutual Consent after Two Years of Marriage'.¹⁴

It should also be noted that, at the time of this public debate, the spectre of Francoism still loomed quite large over the country, and artists used television to erode Francoist values. The pedagogical value of television shows should not be underestimated at a time like that, when democracy needed to be imagined and democratic values taught through narratives of private lives. Although the Divorce Law had come into force, social mores and attitudes did not change overnight, and the political and public debates in the series attest to that. If we consider television as a primary mediator in the public sphere and one of the most influential agents of value construction, then *Wedding Rings* can be considered a powerful mechanism in guiding its viewers through the moral climate of the time.

Television's blurring of the boundaries between public and private supplement transitional moments in history, as television is the ideal medium for the message of change and the creation of a 'mediated democratic polity'.¹⁵ Manuel Palacio, in his excellent book *Historia de la television en España*, analyses the impact television might have had on the transition process. Palacio is careful not to overestimate television's impact, while also sharing important details with the reader. For example, on 15 June 1977, the night of Spain's first democratic elections since 1936, TVE (Spanish national television) celebrated election night by coining the phrase 'fiesta de la democracia' [party for democracy], in an attempt to establish a clear link between the celebration of democracy and the programming for that night. Similarly, on the night of the referendum on the Constitution (6 December 1978), TVE offered a whole array of entertainment programmes celebrating the momentous occasion. TVE's coverage of the assassination of the Atocha lawyers demonstrated another clear example of TVE's commitment to the democratic process. Palacio described the news coverage during the 'seven days in January'¹⁶ as a particularly strong example of how the news presenters communicated the political message of non-violence through visibly remorseful

demand over 21,000 [divorce suits] took place in the first full year after reintroduction, and in 1995 (after some fluctuation) the figure stood at 33,000. Separations consistently and increasingly exceed divorces—in 1991, for example, there were 29,000 divorces and 39,000 separations—reflecting a preference for judicial separation among the middle and upper classes, partly for financial reasons.'

¹⁴ Compare *El País's* less emotive headlines, 23 October 1980: 'Divorce Possible after 2 Years of Separation'; 'Reduced Power of Courts to Deny Divorce'. See also *El País*, 23 June 1981: 'Separation and Divorce Suits Start from August'; 'Congress Rejects 'Tough Clause' of Divorce Bill in Secret Ballot'.

¹⁵ J Corner, *Critical Ideas in Television Studies* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1999) 114.

¹⁶ The assassination of the Atocha lawyers is often referred to as 'seven days in January' due to the film with the same title, directed by Juan Antonio Bardem.

faces. The public display and coverage of communist mourning on television was a crucial ‘distancing act from Francoism’.¹⁷

III. Overview of *Wedding Rings*

Citizens used the topic of divorce as a litmus test for democracy, and the fictional discussions in *Wedding Rings* reflect the range of opinions expressed in the national press. At the start of the pilot episode, Ramón has a very telling conversation with a taxi driver, who—fitting for his profession—is the *vox populi*:

Taxi Driver: There just aren’t any civilised people any more. [...] It’s scary to walk on the street these days.

Ramón: Particularly when you have to work at night.

Taxi Driver: No, I don’t mean robberies, I mean people! People are so impolite, everybody barks at each other. You ask them something politely and they bark at you, particularly in the city centre. [...] It’s like this divorce thing that they’ve just come up with. Do you think that’s a good idea?

Ramón: Good idea? In what sense?

Taxi Driver: In the good old days nobody would get divorced. Everybody put up with their fate. But today..

Ramón: Every now and then there is progress. We’ve also abolished the Inquisition.

Taxi Driver: Progress? What progress? Today people get divorced for any old thing: ‘you are a pig’... ‘you’re betraying me with the secretary’... ‘you’re a drunkard and you hit me’... ‘you’re a whore’. And they get divorced for silly little things ... I find that ridiculous.

Ramón: I know, it’s really bad. It would have to be compulsory.

Taxi Driver: Exactly! Like it used to be.

Ramón: No, I’m talking about divorce. Divorce would have to be compulsory. If not, nobody will make use of the new legislation. Or do you think that happily married couples will get divorced?

Taxi Driver (*in an angry voice*): Happy? Do you honestly think there is such a thing as a happily married couple?

In a smooth cut, the episode links to a scene that introduces the viewer to Lola, the heroine lawyer and colleague of Ramón. Lola speaks to a flower shop assistant, saying, ‘Well, for example mine. My marriage is a happy one. I’ve been happily married for 20 years.’ Lola organises the flower arrangements for her daughter’s wedding, and thus sets the narrative frame nicely for the entire series: the juxtaposition of scenes cross-cutting from one extreme to the other, from Ramón celebrating divorce to Lola

¹⁷ M Palacio, *Historia de la televisión en España* [History of Television in Spain] (Barcelona, Gedisa, 2001) 92–97.

celebrating happy marriages—her own and that of her daughter—as a representative of the next generation.

Wedding Rings is an interesting hybrid between a domestic sitcom, a workplace drama and a lawyer show. Staple scenes take place in the lawyer's office, at the local bar, at Lola's family home or at Ramón's hip bachelor pad overlooking the *Plaza Mayor*.¹⁸ The series does not separate the personal and the professional easily: most of the lawyers' clients are friends or distant relatives and, not unlike many American legal dramas, the series also focuses heavily on Lola and Ramón's private lives. Lola's bourgeois family life and Ramón's bohemian lifestyle feature heavily in each episode, making their own private lives a case study and an integral part of the ongoing debate about divorce. The series mixes narrative strands of deep-level plot lines about the lawyers' private lives that remain unresolved with surface stories about divorce cases that conclude by the end of the episode. These patterns of repetitiveness and unresolved storylines inscribe themselves in the viewer's memory after only a few viewings, and give the audience a sense of connection and continuity. Every episode leaves the viewer eager to know what Ramón's flavour of the month looks like, how Lola copes with her rebellious adult children and how *doña* Trini (Aurora Redondo), the Francoist voice of the past, insults anyone willing to set foot in the lawyers' office in search of a better life.

Because the series centres around divorce, the entire series is implicitly or explicitly gendered. Many of the scenes revolve around the family setting of the divorce cases. Of 13 episodes, only four narratives end in divorce, and viewers witness only one divorce before a judge. Narrative closure in each episode results more from reconciliations or de facto separations than from divorce. The series never actually explains the new Divorce Law to the viewer: does the law require a serious matrimonial offence (typically adultery or physical abuse) to occur, or does one spouse have the right to file for a divorce by mutual consent? Is it a fault or a no-fault divorce? The series fails to explain any of these legal details to the viewer, and in a sense the series provides little specific popular-legal education. The strength of the show is perhaps this self-conscious dramatisation of social issues such as divorce, and the sacrifice of legal proceedings or the details of the juridical process.

The creators of *Wedding Rings* aimed the series at a generalist interpretative community, re-enacting the fictionalised divorce debates at different levels and offering more indirect than direct educational value for the viewer in the sense that the series looks at 'real' cases of marital melodramas rather than the legal technicalities of a divorce. The emotional engagement generated by fiction, in particular by television dramas, informs the social understanding of private issues. The prime questions each episode asks seem to be: why is this particular marriage at risk? Is it anybody's fault? And to what extent can the legal profession help, if at all?

The audience itself then plays the role of both judge and jury. The series displays both a cross-section of society as well as divorce cases, including: aristocratic marriages as a cover-up of homosexuality; a medical doctor whose wife betrays him; the emotionally abused lower-middle-class woman who has finally had enough and falls in love with an actor; a butcher who has an emotionally abusive wife; a mother of

¹⁸ Main square in Madrid.

two who finally wants to leave her marriage of convenience to lead a self-determined life; the young wife of a much older husband who falls in love with a man of her own age; a man who's been living in sin for decades and had children with his de facto partner rather than his de jure wife can now finally divorce the latter. The series uses this assortment of cases as a careful mix of injustices in which neither gender is blamed for their supposedly egotistical desires of filing for divorce. In each case, the viewer empathises with the spouse who wishes to leave, and this empathy—through storytelling—gives the viewer indirect educational value. Personalised emotive accounts of claimants lend themselves to melodramatic narratives of family life and law. At its simplest, then, divorce is where law meets melodrama, and maybe therein lies the success of *Wedding Rings*.

The stigma of divorce looms understandably large within the logic of *Wedding Rings*. The first hurdle for the series' attorneys is obtaining office space, complicated by their admission that they specialise in divorce cases. The landladies, two elderly ladies representing the voice of a Francoist past, are disgusted at their tenants' professional convictions. In a comical misunderstanding at the beginning of the pilot episode, the landladies assume Lola is a prostitute and Ramón her pimp. While not delighted by the prospect of prostitution in their private home, the landladies would have considered it for their own financial gain. At the end of the first episode Ramón comments while sitting in the local bar with his friends: 'If we started a human trafficking, money laundering or an arms trade business, they would have been delighted. But that divorce stuff, good God, none of that! That goes against their principles.' One of the landladies in question, *doña* Trini, becomes a recurring commentator in the series, reminding Lola and Ramón of their 'dirty business', and of the good old days under Franco when everything was better and people were less egotistical. *Doña* Trini also continually mentions that she believes Lola and Ramón are single-handedly responsible for the downfall of Spanish society. The voice of the Francoist past here is taken to such comical extreme that no one takes *doña* Trini seriously, but she nevertheless represents an important reminder of the conservative, and sometimes fascist, factions that were still very much part of the new and now democratic Spain. Many people preferred the stability that arose from law and order to the perceived insecurity of the new democratic system.

IV. The Heroine Lawyer Lola

The series characterises the hero lawyers as struggling partners in a downtrodden law firm. The lawyers' economic struggles are further complicated by the fact that Lola receives anonymous phone calls threatening her because of her chosen legal career. While sewing a button on one of her husband's shirts, Lola explains to him:

I think I'm going to give it up. I'm very vulnerable, these phone calls really frighten me. I'm not a natural rebel and I don't need to be given medals. I'm happily married, what do I care [...] It's not gonna make a big difference anyway if I'm around or not...

These anonymous threatening phone calls were not a fictional exaggeration, but rather a significant part of social reality at the time and reminiscent of the threats to which

attorneys were subjected to in Spain at the time. The Lola character is continuously justifying her anxious existence as a divorce lawyer.

Contrary to the default feminist representation in the 1980s (the more career-oriented the character, the more feminist she is), Lola is not a heroine lawyer who wanted to become an icon of feminist progress; rather, Lola is simply a woman struggling with her career. The extent to which Lola struggles to maintain both her career and family is never more obvious than the summarising sections of the series' divorce narratives. In these scenes set in Lola's kitchen—the female private space *par excellence*—she comments and reflects on her current cases while cooking a meal and talking to her husband, implicitly reminding viewers that it seems natural to ask women to juggle professional and private duties. Simply examining Lola's screen presence could prompt viewers into thinking that she is mainly a housewife who also happens to turn up at the office in the afternoons. When some of Ramón's clients assume Lola is his secretary, she sets them straight with a tone of voice mixing both anger and satisfaction: 'No, I'm one of the partners.' Nevertheless, Lola is not motivated in choosing her profession by overt feminism, other than the 'liberal' conviction that divorce can benefit society and women have a right to self-determination. Calista Flockhart once commented on her role as Ally McBeal: 'Men are just characters. The moment a woman is on television as a lead character, she is expected to be a role model.'¹⁹ If that holds true for Ally McBeal, it must be doubly true for Lola who, as a token personification of progress, comes as little surprise in a television show depicting a new and democratic Spain.

In this sense, Lola can be considered a representative character through which the series communicates larger sociological questions about gendered symbolism. During Spain's transition, women fought for both democracy *and* women's rights, the latter not necessarily being automatically subsumed by the former, even if the 1978 Constitution proclaimed *de jure* equality. Arguably, the series writers imposed—and resisted—cultural narratives on the Lola character; Lola can be read as vacillating between the two poles of a self-confident mother-of-three/divorce-lawyer-superwoman, or a middle-aged back-to-work-type mom, constantly on the verge of a nervous breakdown, and who desperately needs the support of her male colleague and husband. The viewer can find evidence for both constructions in the television show.

We should also distinguish between feminist issues at the character/private level and feminist issues at case level. Lola's female clients appreciate her views regarding feminist issues, and in one particular episode, when a client wants to leave her husband and children to live a self-determined life, Lola's words of wisdom about the ultimate form of female selfishness (abandoning one's children), are significant:

The part of the self-sacrificing mother who would never leave her children I know all too well. And there are two types: those who decide to leave with their children and need to make ends meet from one day to another. To those, chapeau! But I also know the other type, the sinister mother who uses her children as a bargaining point in the divorce settlement. And on top of it they feel like saints. I don't have the slightest prejudice against a woman who, for whatever reason, decides to divorce her husband and give up her children because they are

¹⁹ A Lotz, 'In Ms McBeal's Defense: Assessing Ally McBeal as a Feminist Text' in E Watson (ed), *Searching the Soul of Ally McBeal* (Jefferson, McFarland, 2006) 156.

better off with their father. I have much more respect for that kind of mother, I consider her less egotistical and much braver.

Lola's observations, because the viewer has come to love her as the motherly career woman, have more power than most other characters' would have in a similar situation. It is, perhaps, in comparison to other characters in the show that her views, and their significance, become obvious.

Despite constant family quarrels, Lola is happily married, and part of the series' narrative function of Lola's character is juxtaposing her good marriage and happy family life with the bad marriages of the divorce cases. Clearly, the strength of the show lies partly in depicting lawyers as human beings who have as many relationship problems as the next person. *Wedding Rings* does not depict a perfect world of powerful lawyers who carelessly decide upon the destiny of other people. Both Lola and Ramón constantly struggle with their own private lives. Due to her family situation, Lola can easily relate to complex narratives of family life (and law), and she understands that people are entangled in webs of complicated relationships. For Lola nothing is ever clear-cut; in contrast, Ramón is a self-professed lawyer for the socially disadvantaged that seeks divorce for his clients at almost any price. Lola is also the voice of reason and harmony whenever couples decide not to pursue divorce, while Ramón sees justice in divorce and gets frustrated at the limited usefulness of legal change. Lola is a seemingly conservative family woman in her private life, and hence maybe more suspicious of divorce, while Ramón is the anti-establishment hero lawyer supportive of people who attempt to get out of oppressive marriages.

V. The Hero Lawyer Ramón

Ramón stands as the series' most forceful voice of progress for women's equality and often disagrees violently with Lola, thereby leaving Ramón as the one who strengthens the feminist message of the show. Ramón's choice of profession has clear political motivation based upon his background as the illegitimate child of a working class mother; this gives him ample left-wing credentials, as well as a hunger for social justice. He frequently castigates Lola for not having the courage of her convictions and calls her 'Milady' (using the English term) to denigrate her bourgeois background, her age and marital status. Ramón teases Lola by calling her a 'bastion of traditional values' and reminding her that her seemingly conservative life is inapposite of her profession as a divorce lawyer. Lola, in turn, calls Ramón *el progre* (the lefty), alluding to his anarchist views that denounce legal marriage sanctioned by church or state. Ramón advocates the complete revolution of intimate relationships, and rejects not only marriage's legal framework but its traditional link to monogamy and nuclear family primacy. Ramón has this conviction tested a few times: twice at a private level and once at case level. In two episodes, he falls seriously in love with two women and immediately establishes conservative rules of monogamous relationships in order not to lose them, only to find the women just wanted affairs and would never leave their husbands for him.

As early as episode two, Ramón's human need for connection becomes apparent when he, almost against his will, falls in love with a client who pretends she would like to divorce her husband in order to start a relationship with him. Although Ramón adamantly proclaims that he does not believe in the fairytale of happy marriages, he cannot help but feel happy about the love given by Rosa (Ana Obregón). When Ramón finds out that Rosa will never leave her husband, he finds it surprisingly difficult to accept that their relationship will never be more than an affair. As hard as this realisation may be for Ramón, this particular episode has a fairytale ending of sorts. At the end of the episode, the real reason for Rosa's behaviour is revealed—her husband had become disabled and wheelchair-bound after a sports accident—and, despite Rosa's frivolous behaviour of serial adultery, she cares deeply for her husband and still loves him. When Ramón learns of this, he is full of admiration for Rosa's commitment to her husband. The episode ends with a dialogue between Ramón and his friend Pepe, a bar owner, where Pepe asks him to explain his 'theory that marriage is a utopia' to a group of people in the bar. Ramón, lovingly looking at Rosa, answers succinctly: 'I can't Pepe. I got it wrong. It exists [love and marriage]. I've just learnt what it means.' This admission of error so early on in the series foreshadows later developments in his own life when—at the end of the series—he decides he would like to get married himself. Throughout the series, however, the tension between Ramón's convictions and his own desires become a recurring motif.

Similarly, at case level, Ramón's ambivalence regarding marriage becomes apparent when he takes on a case for an elderly gentleman looking to divorce his *de jure* wife in order to marry his long-standing *de facto* partner. The final scene of that episode shows the happy newly-weds in the foreground while the camera zooms in on Ramón's face in the background. Ramón finds himself shedding near tears of joy, proud to have been involved in somebody else's marital bliss. As in all quality drama shows, writers use continuing narrative threads to lend regular characters unexpected traits and thus render them 'round'. At the end of the day Lola is not quite as bourgeois as Ramón would assume, nor is Ramón quite as anarchist as he would like to be.

VI. When Life Deals a Bad Hand

In one of the series' best episodes, entitled 'When Life Deals a Bad Hand', an embittered wife emotionally abuses her husband, a butcher. Husband Alfredo Astigarraga, the butcher, and his wife Asun are played by guest stars José Bódalo and María Luisa Ponte, and give brilliant performances as two people who cannot stand each other's company anymore. This episode is representative of the series' general format. The episode features constant cross-cutting—technically and metaphorically—between the private and public lives of the lawyers and their clients, and thus between legal issues and everyday life. The episode gives fictional answers to a few vital questions of the parliamentary and public divorce debates: is love a *sine qua non* of marriage? Is mutual consent necessary for a divorce? The episode also poses the implicit question of whether divorce is socially necessary and desirable, assuming there is an element of luck in both life and a person's choice of partner. Although divorce had become

a legal reality, society had not yet considered it socially acceptable. This episode then asks whether there should be legal mechanisms to counteract a marriage contract when life deals a bad hand.

The opening scene has Lola worrying about a supposedly missed period, which later turns out to be the beginning of her menopause. The episode treats this as much a stroke of fate as her husband Enrique's denial of promotion. While Lola is menopausal and cannot have any more children, Enrique is frustrated because his company did not make him a director, his last chance of promotion. Both Lola and Enrique have reached a middle age plateau, and their frustrations are foretold in the storyline. Lola's family ignores her recurrent cry for 'help' (she literally shouts 'help' as if there was an emergency when she is at home and feels nobody helps her), with her son sarcastically telling her not to end up like the 'boy who cried wolf'.

Meanwhile, in the legal part of the storyline, Alfredo, the butcher, actually cries for help and turns to Ramón:

Alfredo: I don't have any legal reasons to separate from my wife. She's a decent woman and attends to everything at home. But I can't stand her anymore. Always in a bad mood, nothing is good enough, nothing cheers her up. She drove our son away and now that he's married she is turning against his wife. Our grandchild is two years old and she hasn't even met him yet. In short, it's a nightmare.

The episode's title, 'When Life Deals a Bad Hand', refers then to both couples, and the episode juxtaposes their crises throughout. When Alfredo tries to explain to his wife that he cannot stand her bitterness anymore, Asun rejects the accusation and claims that love and marriage do not necessarily go hand-in-hand. This retort falls under a 'dialogue of the deaf' and renews the viewer's conviction that this marriage is beyond repair. In one particular cross-cutting, the episode contrasts two marital fights; while both fights are symbolic in nature, Lola's marital fight ends quickly in resolution, while the bitterness of the other couple's argument shows why a divorce would be liberating for both parties. For the considerate viewer, the beauty of the message lies in the subtle juxtaposition: a robust exchange of opposing views ending in affectionate truce, as compared to an emotional and bitter argument of melodramatic proportions. That is the sum total of difference between good and bad marriages.

Alfredo convinces Asun to go and see Ramón to get advice on the divorce proceedings. In her conversation with the lawyer, she admits that:

Asun: I'm not going to miss him. But I don't want to feel incomplete. What benefits do I get out of a separation?

Ramón: Isn't it sad to view it in those terms?

Asun: I don't understand.

Ramón: Doesn't matter. Anyway, financially you don't have to worry about anything.

Asun: Listen, I'm not a very educated person, but I asked around. [...] And I was told that if I didn't agree, there wouldn't be a divorce. You can't allege anything against me.

Ramón: I could have explained that to you as well.

Asun: Well, if it's true, don't count on me. I don't and won't agree to a divorce. And if you want to go to court, do it. Let's see who gets the bigger slice.

Ramón (*with an angry voice*): That's an issue you need to sort out between the two of you. But now that you've taken the trouble to come to my office, let me explain something to you: the only thing that your husband tried to do is legalise a situation that is going to happen anyway. The slice in question—which he doesn't deny you – would have been given to you through legal channels and with proper procedures. The decision you've just taken means he's going to do whatever he damn well pleases. [...] With or without divorce Alfredo won't be living with you anymore.

The dialogue represents the difference between legal possibilities and real-life complications caused by a lack of understanding of the nature of divorce. Asun fears loneliness and social stigma and tries to avoid the unavoidable. Love is not part of the equation for her, and she really cannot understand what she might have done wrong. According to her, marriage is a social institution that is dissolved only by death.

VII. Conclusion

At the end of the series Lola's happy marriage comes to an abrupt end precisely due to her husband's accidental death. Nevertheless, there is an almost fairytale conclusion to the show: Lola and Ramón become a couple; all's well that ends well, although I am sure that this ending would have really annoyed educated viewers for being cheesy, happy and unrealistic. And at a surface level it is, but it also shows how conservatism and anti-establishment attitudes go hand in hand in *Wedding Rings*. Ramón relinquishes his stern bachelorhood to a woman 10 years his senior, which in 1980s Spain was certainly going against social conventions. They declare each other's love in a fake, and deliberately unromantic, ceremony in a car. Ramón, ridiculing the wedding vows, asks:

Do you take this complete wreck as your partner...for better or worse, etc.etc? [Puts wedding ring on her finger] Do you take this stupid cow who is going to spoil your life from this day forward? Yes, I do. Inside your ring it says 'Ramón'. As you can see, I'm very vulgar.

The conservative ending of the entire show and the mostly conservative endings of each episode remind us that *Wedding Rings* represented a careful mediation between the opposing factions of the old and the new Spain. It cautiously locates its ambiguous liberal politics in an unstable combination of modernisation and tradition and thus includes something for everybody. However, despite its highly emotive content, or maybe because of it, attention is more focussed on the sociological and psychological explanations rather than an obvious 'right or wrong' conceptualisation of moral and legal concepts. *Wedding Rings* is also a good example of how some cultural texts reveal an interpretative space that can work against the seemingly conservative textual surface. The point that needs stressing here is that it may precisely be this apparent conservatism, and hence wider acceptance, which could conceivably convert it into a tool of social critique and change. The careful mediation of values might also, at a macro-level, explain why the Spanish transition is one of the more successful in recent history.

