

# Paper weight, or a very civil romance



**Melissa McMahon** reads between the lines of the civil registry.

Some people enjoy looking at strangers on public transport or in a café and making up stories about them – what they do, where they come from, what their situation is. As a translator, I play the opposite game. I am handed a document, for example a birth or marriage certificate, which contains a lot of bald facts – names, places, dates, occupations – and my imagination is free to fill in the gaps. I know the visions are about as reliable as the stories made up about the strangers on a train and I treat them as such, but my imagination has no respect for professional boundaries. It's an involuntary, unreflective response, my mind adding colour to what can be a fairly colourless task of transcription.

The details of the parents on birth certificates, which on French certificates include their occupation, are especially suggestive. Classic couples present an instant soap opera: the doctor and the nurse, the manager and the secretary, the chef and the waitress. Or stories of shared interests or workplaces: the social worker and the legal counsellor, the chemical engineer and the science teacher, the psychologist and “the director of a centre for the maladjusted”. And then the random combinations, intriguing in themselves: the accountant and the hairdresser, the artist and the logistician, the peace officer and the dietician. We can see if they were born in the same tiny rural village or at opposite ends of the earth. How did they meet? When did they know? If the parents are unmarried, I instantly picture a drama or scandal, which is nonsense in this day and age. If they are unmarried and both “students”, I feel maternal concern and hope they're all right, even though the event took place 30 years ago.

## Primacy of ‘civil’ status

The treatment of unmarried parents in France shows how seriously the French take the notion of “civil” status over any “natural” state of affairs. Parentage is established by birth within wedlock, not by biology. Until 2006, unmarried mothers had to formally “recognise” their children, even if already named on the certificate as the mother, this recognition often taking place in late pregnancy (the so-called “declaration on the belly”). Conversely, any man can walk into a town hall and recognise a child as their own, even if not the natural father (assuming no one else has recognised the child first). Here I see Mary and Joseph trudging up to the town hall where Mary, heavy with child, points to her belly before the bespectacled municipal clerk and says “This is mine”, and Joseph duly signs his name alongside.

**Translators and transcribers needed.** A research and education unit within the University of Queensland invites expressions of interest for the transcription and/or translation of filmed stories. The unit is developing the first international EDx X-series of courses about the health of people with intellectual and developmental disability. EDx is an international collaboration of universities to provide free tertiary courses to anyone who wants to take them. <https://www.edx.org>.

The unit needs quotations for transcription then translation into English from languages spoken in Bulgaria, Panama, India and Lebanon. Transcription: hourly rate GST incl, Translation: Rate per word or per 100 words GST incl. For further details and with your quotation please contact Miriam Taylor, [m.taylor3@uq.edu.au](mailto:m.taylor3@uq.edu.au), 07 31632446.

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Civil status in France is also distinct from any “supernatural” order of things: religious marriage ceremonies haven’t carried any legal weight in France since 1791. All marriages must be celebrated civilly to be recognised, leading to many couples having two ceremonies. The date religious marriage was divested of its legal status gives a clue to the impetus behind it. It’s part of the “esprit républicain” coinciding with the Revolution, where one’s status as a citizen takes precedence over any other affiliations, and identity is not about what is given by birth or ordained by a god but what one is prepared to stand up for and commit to as an adult.

### Define us as individuals

As colourless as the names and dates on a registry certificate appear, the coordinates of our “vital events” define us as individuals. No one on the planet or in history shares the precise circumstances of our birth, death or marriage (where applicable – we’ll get to that later). Each entry of a contingent set of spatial and temporal coordinates is a little window into the piece of the world we occupy, a snapshot that combines with all the others to tell the story of a population. Births, deaths and marriages, the three great leaps into the unknown. A life begins, a life ends, and two lives intersect and form a bond: each miraculous and improbable in their own way. Marriage stands out in this group. We have no control over the circumstances of our birth and little over those of our death, but a marriage only exists if it is entered into willingly. It is the most “civil” of the civil statuses in this respect, a conscious commitment to something we believe in. It may be followed by another set of coordinates representing a divorce; no matter, that’s just one more twist in the civil tale.

There’s a lot of life, history, science and politics behind the “piece of paper”, both the playful product of imagination, and the more serious legacy of the civil registry as a social institution.

Barring natural disaster, our entries in the civil register are the only form of posterity we are guaranteed. It is our literally vital legacy to the historian, the genealogist, the statistician, the simply interested. Surely there have been enough episodes of *Who Do You Think You Are?* to convince anyone of the life the civil registry gives us after death and the gift it represents to those who come after us.

### A new perspective on marriage

Thinking about the civil registry has given me a new perspective on the continuing relevance of marriage in this day and age in the West, when few legal and social prejudices remain against de facto couples. Many unmarried couples echo Joni Mitchell’s refrain (from *My old man*): we don’t need no piece of paper from the City Hall keeping us tied and true. This is certainly true – a piece of paper won’t keep a couple together. But that piece of paper has a twin in the civil registry, which is part of the public record and the story of a population. If you are unmoved by the alleged romance of this, think of the statistician. Do it for science.

There are many other reasons couples choose not to marry, and this is their personal right, choice and prerogative. Unless of course you are a same-sex couple, in Australia, in which case not marrying is none of these things, it is dictated by law.

Thinking about the civil registry has given me a new perspective on exactly what we are denying same-sex couples when we deny them the right to marry: namely, a place in our history and our vital statistics, a chance to record their story. A separate “civil union” category strikes me as a form of segregation. When religious principles and a connection to procreation are invoked against same-sex marriage, I think of what I have learned from the French, namely that civil status is distinct from the dictates of nature or religion, but concerns what we are prepared to stand up and be counted for as adults.

### Beyond the mundane

Translating official documents such as birth and marriage certificates is one of the more mundane tasks in a translator’s working life, which stands in contrast to the importance of this service and the life-changing events these documents record. There’s a lot of life, history, science and politics behind the “piece of paper”, both the playful product of imagination, and the more serious legacy of the civil registry as a social institution.

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