



Romance's Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction

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REVIEW

Reconsidering the Familiar: A Fresh Approach to the Victorian Marriage Plot

Romance's Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction, by Talia Schaffer, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2016, 334 pp., £41.99 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-19-046509-4

Talia Schaffer's engaging monograph on the marriage plot in nineteenth-century fiction is strikingly ambitious in its aims and scope. Not only does she address a wide range of texts, but she proposes a new theoretical model by which to approach the subject, arguing that the development of the marriage plot in the Victorian period has been fundamentally misunderstood. Challenging the familiar narrative of the early modern marriage of convenience giving way to the modern marriage of true love, Schaffer shows that the ideal of romantic marriage, based on sexual desire and passionate feeling, was only one of the models of marriage with which Victorian authors were working. The other kind, which she calls 'familiar marriage', recalled older models of matrimony which stressed mutual interests, shared work, familial ties and social obligation, rather than strong sexual attraction. Although familiar marriage owed much to the eighteenth-century ideal of the marriage of rational esteem, it 'was not a fossil from a past era, but ... morphed to answer social problems of the period' (p. 3), and was a real rival to romantic marriage in the mid-Victorian period. As Schaffer shows, the two models of marriage represent more than simply different approaches to this one relationship: they offer fundamentally different visions of family and social life, of what constitutes personal happiness, even of subjectivity itself. Where romantic marriage is all about the feelings of the two people involved, familiar marriage stressed the needs of the couple's wider families and communities, 'maintain[ing] a notion of the self as serving others' needs in a collective' (p. 8). As Schaffer shows, the two-suitor plot, which dominates many Victorian novels, stages a confrontation between these two models of marriage, forcing the heroine to choose between these different ways not only of marrying but of being.

Coining new terminology for its own sake is a common peccadillo of academics, but Schaffer's terms are hard-working, making effective use of the overlapping meanings of both 'familiar' and 'romantic', and teasing out the strands which have been unhelpfully knotted together in the imprecise phrase 'companionate marriage'. As she explains, this has been used by critics and historians in contradictory ways, a conceptual confusion which indicates how little attention has been given to the differences of feeling which lie between competing models of marriage. Such attention yields rich rewards, however, as Schaffer demonstrates in the readings which follow. Her elegantly simple but profoundly suggestive thesis proves its worth in enabling her to offer readings of familiar texts which are consistently both unexpected and highly persuasive.

Having laid the ground work for her discussion by re-casting Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748) as the *ür*-text of the marriage plot novel, Schaffer explores four major models of familiar marriage which Victorian novelists developed to meet the challenges posed by Richardson. The first of these, neighbour marriage, posits marriage to a local squire as an antidote to the uncertainties and dislocations of modern life and, in particular, of modern middle-class women's lives. Marriage to the squire satisfies a nostalgic longing for pastoral stability, along with the prospect of meaningful work and a sphere of influence, but his offer has to compete with the prospect of passion held out by the handsome stranger, the romantic suitor. Schaffer tracks this plot-line from its most perfect incarnation in Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, in which Brandon acts as the archetypal squire-neighbour suitor, to its collapse in Rhoda Broughton's *Cometh Up As A Flower* (1867), and onto interesting permutations in Trollope's *Vicar of Bullhampton* (1870) and Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876).

The next chapter on cousin marriage takes the reader on an enjoyable excursion into the world of Victorian anthropology, demonstrating how female novelists' representations of cousin marriage worked to challenge anthropological claims that sexually motivated, exogamous marriage was essential to civilization. As Schaffer shows, the domestic novel frequently displaced sex from the centre of social life, representing a wide array of happy and fulfilling non-sexual unions between adults, and modelling sexual relationships on the non-sexual, using sibling relationships as models for marriages between cousins. Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) is the exemplary text here, with Charlotte Yonge's *Heartsease* (1854) offering a mid-Victorian reworking of a trope that was to become taboo by the end of the nineteenth century, when Darwinian fears of hereditary taint led to suspicion around cousin marriage, eventually leading Yonge herself to deprecate the practice (p. 157).

Similarly unimaginable later, but positively and prevalently imagined in the mid-Victorian domestic novel, were mutually sustaining and pleasurable relationships between disabled and able-bodied characters, relationships which Schaffer treats as 'disability marriages'. Schaffer persuasively argues that because disabled characters are positioned at the heart of networks of care, they are made central to the domestic novel, to such an extent that the ethics of care they promote come to re-shape marriage. She offers compelling readings of Austen's *Persuasion* (1817) and Yonge's *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865), while her approach to Brontë's Rochester offers a welcome corrective to readings which lazily translate disability into castration and are ill-attuned to the pleasures of Jane and Rochester's reformed relationship.

That said, the decision to treat all dyadic relationships as 'marriages', even when they are explicitly non-sexual, has its drawbacks. While it serves usefully to highlight the non-sexual aspect of marriage, it also obscures the extent to which disabled characters are *excluded* from the marriage plot, and the pain this can generate. For example, Schaffer's account of the relationship between John Halifax and his disabled friend Phineas Fletcher in Dinah Craik's *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856) is closely attentive to the passionate love between the two men, but does not acknowledge that a crucial fact about their relationship is that it is not and never can become a marriage – something that is thrown into sharp relief when John marries someone else, to Phineas's keen distress.

While Phineas is ultimately accommodated in the Halifax home after John's marriage to Ursula (a marriage which in itself neatly fits Schaffer's model of familiar marriage), I think it is a mistake to read past the pain and loneliness that seep into Phineas's stoic narration. Familiar marriage still excludes, and in his moments of grief and isolation Phineas surely anticipates Eliot's more famous disabled loner Philip Wakem in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), who for Schaffer represents a break with the mid-Victorian tradition, as 'the first modern case study of the psychology of a disabled individual in British fiction' (p. 190).

Eliot is also a dominant figure in the final chapter on vocational marriage, suggestively subtitled 'Why Marriage Doesn't Work'. Time and again, novelists of the 1860s show heroines' desire for meaningful work after their marriages – a desire which familiar marriage ought to be able to accommodate – only to show this desire being thwarted. Schaffer builds a convincing case for the influence of the Langham Place feminist group in this regard, and shows that the possibility of a happy familiar marriage with a vocational element became ever more remote as the nineteenth century wore on. Seen from this perspective, Schaffer suggests that 'the turn to romantic marriage can reasonably be read as tragic' (p. 236).

This polemical defence of familiar marriage is an unexpected and enjoyable aspect of the book. Schaffer argues that in a period in which marriage was the only viable career option for most middle-class women, marrying for love looked less like a feminist act of self-assertion and more like a self-limiting concession to the idea that women are motivated (and can be satisfied in life) *solely* by romantic feeling. Not only did familiar marriage allow women to be something more than desiring subjects, but since familiar marriage 'need say nothing about participants' desires ... [it] could cover (and permit) a range of feeling among its participants beyond a conventional heteronormative orientation' (p. 15). The latitude offered by Victorian incarnations of this older form of marriage come to seem profoundly attractive in Schaffer's account, and twentieth-century critics' relentless focus on repressed sexual desire both misplaced and – perhaps ironically – constricting.

It seems clear that if critics in the mid-twentieth century needed to believe in repressed Victorians, and to recover sex as the unspoken motivation in every plot, we are now in a critical moment when the 'Other Victorians' we are looking for are not the pornographers and sexual pioneers of Stephen Marcus's 1966 study,¹ but those who can displace both sex and heterosexism from the centre of the critical conversation. These Victorians are an altogether kindlier and yet stranger breed, less rigidly heteronormative than their twentieth-century descendants, pre-Freudians whose attitudes hark back to their eighteenth-century past as much as they anticipate a *fin-de-siècle* future. Crucially, they are able to offer us older – but curiously more hopeful – ways of understanding sexuality, disability, marriage and family. Doubtless this view of the Victorians will give way to another, as present needs evolve, but Schaffer's take on the marriage plot seems

1. Stephen Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966)

likely to stand the test of time, offering as it does compelling readings of an impressively broad range of texts, and holding out intriguing possibilities for many more to come.

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