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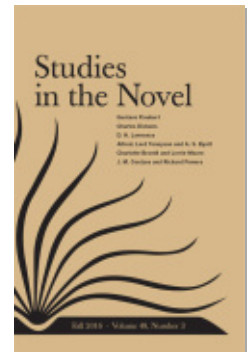
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Romance's Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction by Talia Schaffer  
(review)

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**SCHAFFER, TALIA.** *Romance's Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 352 pp. \$65.00 hardcover.

*Romance's Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction* is a meticulously researched, consummately assembled book that offers a revelatory argument about marriage in the Victorian era. Schaffer's thesis that an alternative model of "familiar marriage" privileging "trust, comradeship, practical needs, and larger social organization" coexisted with the "newly popular notion of romantic marriage" in the nineteenth-century novel complicates an array of existing critical conceptions of marriage, especially those that have emphasized erotic desire, progressivism, or individualism (2-3). In demonstrating how familiar marriage emerged as a literary convention both to cope with changing ideas about marriage and "to work through different ways of thinking about a subject's future," Schaffer's book opens up new vistas for our understanding of marriage and formulations of female subjectivity in the many novels she discusses and beyond (7-8).

Not least among the many delights of *Romance's Rival* are the seamless structure of the book and crystalline clarity of Schaffer's prose. Her style is everywhere engaging and the book just as unfailingly engages, accounting at every turn for the many discourses that have informed and are now meaningfully altered by her work. Seeking to "provide a larger historical context in which to connect" the varied findings of previous scholarship on marriage and the novel, Schaffer situates her project among the foundational studies of Stone, Watt, and Armstrong as well as amid more recent enlargements of the field by Perry, Corbett, Davidoff, Ablow, Marcus, Hager, Michie, and McAleavey (26). Over the course of this comprehensive book, Schaffer likewise intervenes in research on class, anthropology, disability, and women's work.

Schaffer's first chapter defines familiar marriage against its long-studied counterpart, the "romantic marriage," an approach mirrored by nineteenth-century fiction itself as "Victorian marriage plots very often stage a rivalry between a familiar and romantic suitor" (7). Analyzing Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* as her principal introductory case study, Schaffer explains that her term refers in particular to a female character's marriage with "someone familiar," such as a neighbor or extended family member (4). Although there are many, the most significant distinction Schaffer formulates between romantic and familiar marriage is the way in which the latter enables a female character access to and agency in a social network, rather than ensconcing her within "the private conjugal dyad" (4). The import of this claim is reflected in Schaffer's method of "giving special attention to four of the main formulations" of familiar marriage: "neighbor marriage, cousin marriage, disabled marriage, and vocational marriage" (8-9). As she goes on to show in chapters three through six, each organized around one of these categories, these types of connubial arrangements allowed female characters to secure, respectively, "social empowerment, familial benefit, caretaking networks, or career access" in ways that romantic marriage often foreclosed (9).

Although she pinpoints her focus on texts written between the 1850s-1870s, Schaffer's book provides an expansive view, detecting the germination of the familiar marriage plot in both history and literary tradition from the early modern period onward (15). Her second chapter examines an at first surprising composite of disparate texts—*Romeo & Juliet*, *Clarissa*, and *Northanger Abbey*—but as she traces "the changing means of marriage during the two centuries preceding the Victorian era, stressing the cultural expectations and legal changes that gradually accumulated" to create these

rival suitor types, her treatment of these works is illuminating and convincing (41-42). Having established this developmental history, Schaffer turns in her third chapter to an exploration of the nineteenth-century novel's familiar suitor, charting his emergence in socio-economic shifts and his transformations in the specific narrative form of "Neighbor Marriage" across the work of Austen, Broughton, Trollope, Eliot, and Forster to illustrate how, while romantic marriage signified dislocation and isolation, familiar marriage to a neighbor (often a country squire) represented opportunities for female characters to remain in their original communities and become more socially empowered there (77).

Chapter four shifts our attention inward, away from neighborhood networks toward familial ones, as Schaffer conveys how endogamous "cousin marriage" could function as a restorative, "reinforcing and consolidating family ties that may have been frayed" (123). First demonstrating the ways Victorian anthropology and fiction propounded antithetical positions regarding exogamy and endogamy, Schaffer then analyzes *Mansfield Park*, *Heartsease*, and—stunningly—*Wuthering Heights* against the landscape of evolving views on marriage perpetuated by anthropologists (as well as by Freud) to recuperate our ability to understand cousin marriages not as "sexually diseased or politically retrograde" but as many Victorians did: as productively modeled on sibling love and capable of fortifying the family (148). Chapter five similarly seeks to reverse established methodologies for reading marriage as well as disability with its claim that "the disabled subject of the nineteenth century was the center of a social network," and so legal marriage, cohabitation, or simply a caregiving relation with a disabled character could provide "a kindly community of care" (160, 169). Applying the feminist ethics of care, Schaffer demonstrates in analysis of novels by Austen, Yonge, and Craik that, in these "marriages," both male and female characters obtain increased sociality and purpose. The chapter concludes with a masterful reading of Eliot that positions *The Mill on the Floss* as a novel that both rejects all forms of familiar marriage and forecasts darker, modern views on disability.

One of the greatest rhetorical strengths of Schaffer's study is the way in which she reads novels like Eliot's, with the potential to undermine her argument, in unexpectedly new ways to bolster her thesis and deepen its impact. This strategy is perhaps best exemplified in her treatment of "Vocational Marriages" in chapter six. Here, she argues that although plots in which a female character marries in the hope of accessing meaningful work frequently recur in Victorian fiction, they are usually rejected. Formulating a "suppressive hypothesis" that arises out of the political activism of The Langham Place Writers and is modeled on Foucault's "repressive hypothesis," Schaffer reveals how this form of familiar marriage represented at once the desire for female vocation as well as the "tendency to punish, deny, or suppress women for pursuing that work in marriage" (206). As her interpretations of Austen criticism and novels by Oliphant, Eliot, and Trollope indicate, vocational marriage played a large part in securing the dominance of the romantic marriage plot in the centuries to come. Nevertheless, as Schaffer asserts, "the category of the familiar marriage is crucial to Victorian marriage plots, regardless of whether the familiar lover triumphs....The Victorian novel does not always endorse familiar marriage by any means, but its presence acted like a dark background to the blazing light of the romance plot, defining its negative spaces, its absences, its risks, and its failures" (121).