

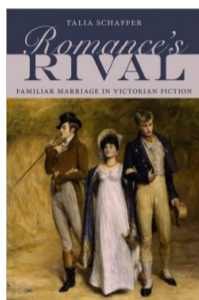


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ROMANCE'S RIVAL: FAMILIAR MARRIAGE IN VICTORIAN FICTION

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By Talia Schaffer (Oxford, 2016) xvi + 334 pp. Reviewed by Elsie B. Michie on 2017-01-17.

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The first decades of the twenty-first century have generated a radical rethinking of the Victorian marriage plot. Ruth Perry's Novel Relations (2004), Sharon Marcus's Between Women (2007), Mary Jean Corbett's Family Likeness (2008), Kelly Hager's Dickens and the Rise of Divorce (2010), Elsie B. Michie's The Vulgar Question of Money (2011), Maia McAleavy's The Bigamy Plot (2015), reviewed on this site, and Kathy Psomiades' ground-breaking essays on marriage, contract, and Victorian anthropology have all invited critics to widen their conceptions of how marriage works in the nineteenth-century novel. Talia Schaffer's new book makes a significant contribution to this growing body of work by situating nineteenth-century fictional accounts of marriage within a context that goes back to the Middle Ages. According to Schaffer, there has always been a tension between "romantic marriage" and "familiar marriage." This tension, she argues, becomes visible in the work of eighteenth-century novelists, reaches its climax in British novels of the mid-nineteenth century, and is then rewritten by the end of that century into the narrative that has dominated novel criticism: the story of the individual desiring subject seeking satisfaction in romantic marriage.

Schaffer's book recovers the kinds of familiar marriage that play a key role in nineteenth-century fiction but have largely been ignored by modern readers: neighbor marriage, cousin marriage, disability marriage, and vocational marriage. From Schaffer's point of view, these alternative marriages are part of an old plot that has dropped out of critical conversations because of modern emphases on the erotic and individualistic aspects of marriage. Turning away from such emphases toward female subjects in both history and fiction, Schaffer asks what these women want from marriage. It turns out that they do not always want to be swept away by tall, dark, handsome strangers.

In fear of strangers, they may seek instead to marry individuals who are familiar to them and who provide access to a community rather than to the isolated paradise of individual romantic love. Though critics have been taught to regard the romantic plot as the "sexy" version of marriage, Schaffer insists that familiar marriage provides a different set of pleasures. "[F]amiliar marriage," she writes, "maintained a notion of the self as serving others' needs in a collective, while romantic marriage saw self as an independent agent maximizing its own pleasure"(8). As Schaffer explains later, "[f]amiliar marriage is characterized by extension and duration. It thinks of love as something that develops over years of shared work. It justifies marriage according to long-term rewards. . . . By contrast, romantic marriage's chronotope is one of intense contraction. Temporally, it lives in the passionate and immediate present moment, and spatially it prioritizes the private space in which lovers can enjoy their exclusive pleasure, or later, the nuclear family can be walled off in a private haven"

As these passages demonstrate, this book articulates its argument with remarkable clarity and eloquence. It also has a very conscious and consistent structure. Each chapter is headed by an epigraph from *Jane Eyre* (1847), a novel Schaffer uses to set up her argument in the two introductory chapters on the theory and history of marriage. Also, in each chapter Schaffer establishes her argument by analyzing one or more Jane Austen novels. In Chapter Three, *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) are both used to illustrate the plot of neighbor marriage: living at first on the margins of society both economically and socially, the heroine finds that marriage to a local squire provides her with security and moves her to the center of the novel's social community. In Chapter Four, *Mansfield Park* (1814) is used to show how love between siblings--Fanny and her brother--does not signify incest but rather provides a model for strong affective bonds that are fulfilled through marriages between cousins. In Chapter Five, which explores disability marriage in terms of *Persuasion* (1818), Schaffer explains how a heroine ignored by her titled family members makes satisfying emotional connections by caring for those who are ill or disabled. Since the hero is likewise interested in caring for others, this common solicitude becomes the basis for Anne Elliott's marriage to Wentworth. Finally, in Chapter Six, *Emma* (1815) is said to reveal the novel's inability to grant its heroine a marriage that includes work as well as love. But rather than diagnosing Emma's problem as an unmet need for work, Schaffer argues, modern criticism has focused on what this book consistently critiques: the plot of romantic marriage and sexual desire.

After using a novel by Austen to illustrate a particular kind of familiar marriage, each chapter turns to the period between the late 1840s and the 1860s, when marriage was being dissected in novels, in Victorian anthropology, and in debates about the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857. These chapters move deftly between canonical novelists of the period--Charlotte and Emily Brontë, Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope, and George Eliot--and non-canonical authors such as Charlotte Yonge, Rhoda Broughton, Margaret Oliphant, and Dinah Mulock Craik. Indeed, one of the great pleasures of this book is the breadth of its author's knowledge of Victorian fiction as well as both the history and theories of marriage. After the second chapter shows how the marriage plot reflects the history of marriage, the chapter on neighbor marriage further explores nineteenth-century conceptions of marriage and community along with the historical and critical development of the self-interested and monadic liberal subject in the form of *homo economicus*. Likewise, the chapter on cousin marriage links the mid-Victorian novel to anthropological theories of marriage prevailing at that time, and the chapter on vocational marriage ties the novel to the development of the Langham Place circle and its articulation of feminist practices regarding women and work.

In some ways, the chapter on disability is a slight outlier, as it evokes not nineteenth-century history but modern theories of disability and, most importantly, the ethics of care. Using these theories to great advantage in what is perhaps her clearest formulation, Schaffer shows what heroines and novel readers alike may gain from thinking about love and marriage in relation to communities of care rather than individual desire. This chapter also applies her conception of marriage to same-sex pairs: a move she anticipates earlier, when she argues that the relation between Catherine Morland and Isabella Thorpe in Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (1817) functions as a romantic marriage plot.

The chapter on vocation also entails modern theory. Once she has established the historical background for her argument about women and work, Schaffer turns to Foucault. Anticipating, she argues, Foucault's concept of a "repressive hypothesis," nineteenth-century feminism posits "a suppressive hypothesis" (212); ironically, feminist thinking of the mid-Victorian period defined a woman's desire to work as something suppressed. Jarvis's discussion of work, like her analysis of disability, points both toward the novel and outward to Schaffer's broader interest in marital relations that move beyond sexuality. Her book repeatedly asks us to think about what would happen to our readings of novels if we privileged topics like work and community as much as we now privilege desire.

Though Schaffer does not identify George Eliot's novels as a through line, they invariably mark the failure or preclusion of the familiar marriage. As Schaffer notes in her discussion of *Daniel Deronda* (1876), Gwendolyn's marriage to the local squire Grandcourt proves disastrous. In *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), where Maggie's pitying affection for the hunchbacked Philip Wakem does not lead to a disability marriage, cousin marriage is likewise problematized. And in explaining that *Middlemarch* makes failure crucial to the story of women's desire to ally marriage and vocation (229), Schaffer identifies precisely what Eliot's novels do to the familiar marriage plot that Schaffer has so deftly uncovered. In narrating negative versions of this plot, Eliot confirms its importance for the Victorian writer generally and sets the stage for its abandonment in modern novels like those of E. M. Forster.

Painting in broad strokes by addressing a long history of conceptions of marriage, Schaffer examines the work of novelists ranging from Samuel Richardson to E. M. Forster, moves between canonical and non-canonical texts, and challenges big critical commonplaces. As she explains in her preface, "what I enjoy doing, and what I specialize in most, is tracking the faint scent of alternative ideologies--residual, oppositional, subversive or conservative alternatives to the mainstream ways of thought--through the thicket of apparent normativity" (xi). In this book, Schaffer's intellectual excavations give pleasure by enabling us to see the marriage plot in a revolutionary new way.

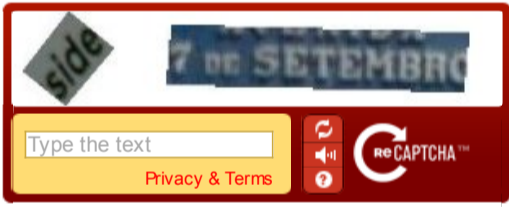
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