



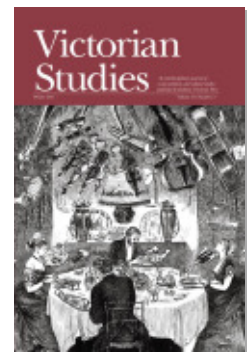
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Romance's Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction by
Talia Schaffer (review)

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and ineffective nosiness, to a conspiratorial thief of personal and political information, a threat not only to the sanctity of the domicile, but also to the security of the state (174).

By examining *Pry* as a discourse which illuminated topics as wide-ranging as state secrecy, market articulation and segmentation, postal espionage, the protection of personal information, and the evolution of private and public spheres, Vincent produces an original account that explodes the reading of a light-hearted play into a bracing investigation of numerous other categories of cultural practice. From the outset he argues for the legitimacy of a critical exploration of privacy “through the prism of a single dramatic character . . . [as] an innovative and an appropriate form of social history” (22). He concludes his nine-chapter study with a reiteration of the value inherent in this novel approach: “Nothing is understood unless full respect is paid to the sheer vitality of Poole and Liston’s theatrical creation, to the energy of the response to it by audiences and the consumer market, and to the spirit of its application in a range of discourses in the rest of the nineteenth century” (229). Vincent’s spirited curiosity and vigorous research into the extraordinarily buoyant, mottled afterlife of *Pry* signals his own full respect for the subject of his investigations.

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Romance’s Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction, by Talia Schaffer; pp. xvi + 334. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, £41.99, \$65.00.

For literary scholars interested in the Victorian marriage plot and cultural studies scholars interested in nineteenth-century attitudes toward romance, domesticity, and woman’s place in society, Talia Schaffer’s *Romance’s Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction* is essential reading. Well-written, wide-ranging, sensitive to Victorian preoccupations, and constructed around illuminating paradigms illustrated with examples from important canonical and noncanonical texts, this study is a standout among the good examinations of Victorian marriage to have appeared in recent years.

Schaffer’s starting point is the perception that the partnership founded on desire is by no means a given in Victorian fiction. Rather, she traces a pervasive pattern in which the “nondesiring relationship” competes, often successfully, with passion, in the process exposing the advantages and disadvantages of each (ix): “The two-suitor plot, with each suitor embodying a different marital ideal,” she argues, “helped Victorians work through different ways of thinking about a subject’s future” (7–8). That romantic love won the struggle for marriage’s soul does not invalidate the nineteenth-century cultural importance of companionate love or, to use Schaffer’s term, “familiar marriage,” but it does, as she observes, make it harder for the reader acculturated to the romantic ideal to see and value “romance’s rival.” Her book thus serves a valuable corrective function by asking not how nineteenth-century writers should have approached marriage but how they did approach it.

Schaffer's study is divided into six chapters: "Theorizing Victorian Marriage," "Historicizing Marriage, Developing the Marriage Plot," "Neighbor Marriage: Loving the Squire," "Cousin Marriage: Reading on the Contrary," "Disability Marriage: Communities of Care in the Victorian Novel," and "Vocational Marriage, or, Why Marriage Doesn't Work." Chapter 1 defines familiar marriage and explores why it became fundamental to the Victorian novel, illustrating the argument by using *Jane Eyre* (1847) as its core text. While today's reader is likely to see Charlotte Brontë's novel as offering Jane a choice between an unpalatable familiar marriage to St. John and an appealing romantic marriage to Rochester, Schaffer complicates this reading by suggesting that St. John's offense is not that he sees Jane as "formed for labour, not for love" but that he insists that passion must form part of their union, whereas Rochester's ultimate attractiveness is that he comes to see Jane not as plaything but as helpmeet and nurse (*Jane Eyre*, edited by Q. D. Leavis [Penguin Books, 1988], 428). In other words: "The romantic marriage with Rochester must be flattened and filed and notched until it resembles the supposedly counterfeit model of marriage that St. John had originally offered." Familiar and romantic marriage thus "reshape each other" to provide the happy ending, a pattern fundamental to Schaffer's insightful vision of the nineteenth-century marriage plot (16).

While all chapters of this book invoke multiple texts, each also takes a central novel to serve as touchstone. For chapter 2, this novel is *Clarissa* (1748), a choice illustrating Schaffer's interest in placing the Victorian novel in the context of its roots. Clarissa's distrust of the rake, and Samuel Richardson's approval of the rational and balanced suitor whom he would later portray as Sir Charles Grandison, are tempered by Evangelicalism and Romanticism in ways that permit these figures to emerge as legitimate rivals in mid-nineteenth-century fiction. Chapter 3 traces this rivalry through the "neighbor marriage" plot, in which the heroine contemplates marriage to what the opening of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) describes as "a single man in possession of a good fortune" and living nearby (*Pride and Prejudice*, intro. Tony Tanner [Penguin Books, 2003], 5). Here the core texts by Jane Austen—*Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* (1811)—give way to successors such as Rhoda Broughton's *Cometh Up as a Flower* (1867), Anthony Trollope's *The Vicar of Bullhampton* (1870), and even E. M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910), each iteration showing the gradual evolution of the neighbor plot in ways that nonetheless continue what Schaffer sees as its dominant note: "Victorian yearning for *Gemeinschaft* (organic community) and Victorian belief in the efficacy of female influence . . . fantasies about female power, about moving from the margins of a community to its absolute center" (37). Her insights about the importance of community shape her readings in productive ways.

Chapter 2 involves Schaffer in discussion of the historiography of marriage and family life, with particular attention to the not altogether happy influence of Laurence Stone; in chapter 4, she turns to Victorian anthropology's efforts to produce its own history of marriage and its remote past. While for early anthropologists exogamy was a positive development, novelists were not always persuaded, and Schaffer looks particularly at *Mansfield Park* (1814) and *Wuthering Heights* (1847), together with Charlotte Yonge's *Heartsease* (1854), to explore cousin marriage as a remedy to earlier family strife. Science fought back against endogamy, however, with late-century agitation about eugenics and the perils of inbreeding. Throughout this study, familiar marriage seems allied with the

past and romantic marriage with the future, though the outcome of the struggle between tradition, history, and community on the one hand and “progress” and the individual on the other was by no means certain.

Interestingly, one way in which community was emphasized was through plots involving affiliation with disabled men, who were typically depicted as having strong ties to others—caregivers, family members, and servants—and thus could offer an orphaned protagonist entrée into a fully developed social web. Here again, Schaffer begins her analysis of the chapter’s paradigm with an Austen novel, in this case *Persuasion* (1817), before moving on to Ralph Touchett in Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880–81), a male union in Dinah Mulock Craik’s *John Halifax, Gentleman* (1856), Yonge’s *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865), and George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). While marriage to the disabled suitor does not always occur, it is consistently presented as having its attractions, among them that the protagonist has scope to contribute productively to the community via nursing. This idea of the importance of work continues in the final chapter’s discussion of “vocational marriage,” where Schaffer provides a fascinating account of how, beginning in 1855, “feminism evolved in a way that required a rhetoric of female failure and enforced a vision of marriage as the opposite of work” (39). Once that rhetoric had taken hold, familiar marriage lost the competition; in the vocational marriage plot of the later nineteenth century, Schaffer contends, “the attempt to achieve familiar marriage is always disastrous” (237).

This overview cannot adequately convey the pleasures of reading *Romance’s Rival*, which arise both from the originality of Schaffer’s working out of her insights and from the compendiousness of her approach. Mindful that Dorothea’s vocational marriage in *Middlemarch* (1871–72) is one of the “disasters” to which chapter 6 alludes, I will not assert that *Romance’s Rival* offers the key to all mythologies involving the Victorian marriage plot. It is, however, an excellent book.

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