New World Courtships: Transatlantic Alternatives to Companionate Marriage, by Melissa M. Adams-Campbell
Romance’s Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction, by Talia Schaffer

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BOOK REVIEW


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Beyond Romance: Unconventional and Familiar Marriage Plots in Early Transatlantic and Nineteenth-Century Novels

“It is not a lack of love, but a lack of friendship that makes unhappy marriages.” Nietzsche’s quip succinctly states the key purpose of the companionate marriage: to choose a suitable partner whose characteristics befit a harmonious friend. With this more modern understanding, love and desire alone are incapable of producing marital harmony. Comparing alternative courtship and marriage practices from the Atlantic world in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel and reassessing non-desiring, “familiar marriages” in the Victorian novel, Melissa M. Adams-Campbell and Talia Schaffer respectively offer new visions through which to assess the functions of the marriage plot. Both studies trace the narrative history of marital diversity, offering new readings of fiction that challenge and resituate companionate marriage as the measure of not only women’s but the nation’s progress.

Finding narrative alternatives to Enlightenment claims that romantic marriage benefits women and society, Adams-Campbell illuminates comparative marriage plots in early transatlantic novels. Importantly, these late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Anglophone Atlantic novels challenge European companionate marriage plots, courtship practices, and romantic life. For those who research literary marriage plots, they will find Adams-Campbell’s comprehensive theoretical and historical framework in the chapter “Why Marriage Mattered Then” particularly useful. The chapter takes the anonymously published The Female American; or, The Adventure of Unca Eliza Winkfield (1767) and John Millar’s The Origin of the Distinction in Ranks (1771) to chart the disruptive power of non-British marriage values and gender roles. Millar finds society has four distinct stages, and argues that economically advanced societies offer women more agency to seek personal happiness in marriage. Thus, the British ideal of companionate marriage is a measure of women’s social and national progress, a progression that leads to personal choice and increases in romantic affection. Critical to Adams-Campbell’s sociohistorical reading is the observation that studies like Millar’s often criticize practices in societies considered by the British to be less developed, such as Native American
matrilineal models of community organization, upholding the patriarchal domestic ideals of Britain. Marriage-rites anthologies and stadial histories prioritize emotional companionship within marriage and fail to account for alternate ways women experience sexual and non-sexual relationships. These readings reinforce Adams-Campbell’s larger point that we must look to narratives that offer diverse strategies for imagining different socialities in order to better understand the sustained resistance to and critique of companionate marriage.

After tracing the significance of courtship traditions in popular “marriage-rites” anthologies, stadial theory, and Unca Eliza Winkfields’s *The Female American* (1767), which is the groundwork for this larger argument, *New World Courtships* explores such colonial America courtship rituals such as bundling, the *ménagères* of the Caribbean that offered “free unmarried mulatto women” more control over their lives “when acting outside of the marriage system” (85), and the “tropicopolitan heroine” whose outsider perspective allows for a rewriting of domesticity. This is seen in the chapter “A Postcolonial Heroine ‘Writes Back,’” which examines the anonymously published *The Woman of Colour: A Tale* (1808). Intersecting postcolonial theories of otherness with seminal critical studies of the domestic and the rise of the novel, such as Nancy Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction* and Joseph Allen Boone’s *Tradition Counter Tradition*, this chapter illustrates how the transatlantic novel moves beyond the marriage or death plot, offering transgressive strategies for a “new pattern of domesticity” (101). Adams-Campbell notes that though Olivia Fairfield, the biracial Jamaican heroine of the novel, seeks and finds a companionate marriage to her white cousin, she fully embraces self-declared “widowhood” when his first wife is discovered to be alive. As “widow,” Olivia “frees herself from the unequal partnership of marriage and the dictates of the marriage plot” (109). Acknowledging that the unmarried woman of color faces unique challenges and oppression in early nineteenth-century Jamaica, Adams-Campbell convincingly asserts that the Caribbean culture provides numerous models of successful single black and mixed-race women “surviving and thriving,” engendering Olivia’s potential as a wealthy, powerful social leader in the black community.

Especially compelling is chapter 2, which discusses Frances Brooke’s *The History of Emily Montague* (1769) in terms of contemporary Mohawk oral traditions. With engaging close readings, the chapter offers a persuasive argument for how the authority of Native American women to regulate their own marriages infiltrates European discourse. Because Wendat and Haudenosaunee matrilineal cultures value gender balance, novels like Brooke’s *Emily Montague* that explore nonpatriarchal society where women are valued as contributing citizens have the potential to threaten “British companionate-marriage relations from notions of progress” (50). Adams-Campbell claims that women readers of Anglophone novels are attracted to the illusion of control “offered by the marriage plot’s emphasis on spousal choice” (46). Brooke’s narrator Arabella Fermor illuminates this spousal choice, devaluing Native American women’s agency to “choose a chief” or access self-divorce, and favoring British women’s right to choose a husband. Adams-Campbell reemphasizes that it is novels like these that ignore the reality that British women had less agency in choosing their own spouses, dismissing the wider cultural agency enjoyed by indigenous women.
Adams-Campbell also includes her current, fascinating oral history research, for which she sought out women’s courtship stories, emphasizing how women’s cultural and public power destabilizes the patriarchal romance narrative.

As it discusses New England, Caribbean, and Native American narrative examples, *New World Courtships* acknowledges that many of these novels are epistolary, such as Emily Montague and American author Leonara Sansay’s *Secret History; or, The Horrors of St. Domingo* (1808), and briefly mentions Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* and *Clarissa*. But readers may be wondering: What is it about the epistolary format that allows for a unique expression of alternative courtship and marriage plots? Exploring this answer, especially in terms of the history of epistolary and the British novel, which is knitted to the romantic marriage plot, might be a helpful direction for the author’s further projects. And while *New World Courtships* solidly places each of the transatlantic narratives within its British novel context, more acknowledgment of early American and British novels that also offer courtship alternatives—such as several of Charles Brockden Brown’s novels, the work of Delarivier Manley, and much amatory fiction—would have bolstered the perspective. Yet Adams-Campbell provides a rich display of alternate marriage plots, including those offered in an array of American seduction and fallen women narratives that revise the typical outcome for the heroine (death) and often envision utopic communities made up of transnational women.

By widening the reach of feminist readings of fictional marriage to a comparative focus on Atlantic marriage practices, *New World Courtships* convincingly aligns Anglophone novels that disturb normative romantic relations, arguing that particular traditions in the Americas “threaten the primacy of the patriarchal companionate-marriage ideal” (9). One of its many strengths is the way it places these narratives in sociohistorical context, offering readers a solid understanding of how emotional companionship is prioritized and valued. And by discussing current marriage debates in the Epilogue, such as same-sex marriage rights, Adams-Campbell underscores the primacy of progressive styles of marriage, and even questions whether marriage should be the ultimate aspiration. She leaves readers with a broad, interdisciplinary perspective on diverse, multicultural responses to marriage, encouraging us to move beyond the persistent courtship plot that most of the novels in this period offer.

*New World Courtships*’s exploration of alternative marriage forms in Anglophone Atlantic novels intersects with Schaffer’s *Romance’s Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction* in numerous and insightful ways. Both identify marriage practice as representative of national values, acknowledging the works of Joseph Allen Boone as well as Stephanie Coontz in *Marriage, A History*, which identify the shift to wage labor and new Enlightenment ideas such as liberal humanism as enabling the rise of companionate marriage. While Adams-Campbell argues that both canonical and little known transatlantic novels that include alternative and even “exotic” forms of marriage customs blend with European traditions to cast romantic practice as representative of the New World, Schaffer also traces the descent of the companionate plot, grounding her assessment of the rise of romantic marriage in meticulous historical research. Both studies of alternative marriage forms discuss novels with
well-developed female protagonists, connect changes in the companionate plot with early feminism and emerging middle class values, and explore diverse forms of partnering that emphasize the benefits of endogamous and family relations, as well as forms of female community.

Schaffer divides her argument and chapters into four types of what she terms “familiar marriage” (which she deems more specific than the oft used “companionate marriage”): neighbor, cousin, disability, and vocational. The breadth of her examples is astounding, persuading us to reevaluate canonical romantic plots such as those offered in *Jane Eyre*. Most helpful to scholars of the marriage plot is Schaffer’s introductory chapters that theorize and historicize marriage, accounting for seminal studies such as Lawrence Stone’s *The Family, Sex and Marriage* and Nancy Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, while situating her argument among recent assessments such as Ruth Perry’s *Novel Relations*. Chapter two, “Historicizing Marriage, Developing the Marriage Plot,” offers a survey of familiar marriage from medieval to Victorian practices and, following Coontz, argues that the emergence of Enlightenment liberal theory allowed for both subjectivity as well as the precedence of individual needs over the larger community. For Schaffer, this results in partners choosing pleasure and personal enjoyment over social satisfaction. Fascinatingly, she recalibrates the rise of the novel: she centers on Richardson’s *Clarissa*, which she argues must be read as “a study of marriage, not of rape” (61). Readers will also be interested in Schaffer’s assessment of Burney’s *Evelina* within this framework, as well as the triumph of the familiar over the romantic in Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*. The next three chapters discuss the function of neighbor, cousin, and disability marriage, which in Schaffer’s view offer sociable, powerful alternatives to the emerging yet dangerous romantic marriage. Each of these “case studies” is grounded in close readings of Jane Austen. For example, Schaffer examines how the familiar suitor, the “squire next door” type epitomized by Knightley in *Emma*, sets a traditional model of stasis, comfort, and social orientation attractive to many female characters throughout the nineteenth-century novel, including Nell in Rhoda Broughton’s *Cometh Up as Flower* and Mary Lowther in Anthony Trollope’s *The Vicar of Bullhampton*. Chapter four emphasizes the way women were drawn to endogamous marriage, such as that with a cousin or brotherly figure, as a safe haven. Why do female characters such as Fanny Price, Catherine Earnshaw, and Cathy Linton idealize and desire familial partners? Schaffer addresses this problem with historical deftness, offering us an alternate view of partnership grounded in anthropological and sociological concepts. Noting that nineteenth-century readers would not find cousin marriage distasteful or incestuous until the end of the century, when hereditary fears began to emerge, Schaffer illuminates the benefits of endogamous marriage, such as the enjoyment of “equivalent status and shared history” and a strengthening of family ties. Particularly interesting is the discussion of sibling “quasi-marriage” in Yonge’s *Heartsease*, a revision of *Mansfield Park*. In Schaffer’s reading, Yonge depicts the emotional benefits of the consanguineal home and sororal partnership in contrast with the diseased form of romantic love, complicating our assumptions about the triumph of the romance plot. As Schaffer remarks,
the novel reminds us that “Victorian readers found it perfectly pleasurable to have a novel without passionate romantic love” (147).

Schaffer’s range of Victorian examples supports her persuasive readings, which ask us to reframe our post-Freudian and post-Foucauldian sexualized interpretations. Importantly, each familiar marriage chapter posits particular and complex cultural shifts (such as anthropological studies that cited the dangers of endogamous marriages) in order to distinctly explain the descent of these popular forms. In addition, Schaffer describes how the romantic suitor often absorbs aspects of the familiar suitor as the Victorian novel negotiates past values and modern ideas concerning the fulfilling, happy marriage.

While neighbor and cousin marriages allow women “the fantasy of constructing an organic community around themselves” (123), Schaffer argues that disability marriage—while still accommodating erotic desire—is also about personal social relations, yet offers particular pleasures that involve a system of mutual caretaking. In the most provocative chapter, “Disability Marriage: Communities of Care in the Victorian Novel,” Schaffer argues that the disabled man engenders a social network for the isolated woman. Intersecting Victorian understandings of the invalid body (quite different from our current notion of “disabled”) with the modern feminist theory of “ethics of care,” Schaffer argues that caretaking is gender-neutral and leads to “loving cohabitation among individuals who would normally be debared from marriage” (38). In the Victorian novel, this radical alternative to familial marriage mirrors its result: although marriage may not be the end result of these plots, they engender communities of care, affection, and love. Acknowledging same-sex readings of the Victorian novel such as Eve Sedgwick’s and Sharon Marcus’s, Schaffer asks her reader to reimagine “affective relations” that “flourish outside heteronormative pairs” which resist a homosocial or erotic reading. This “familiar couplehood” or “quasi-marital relationship” is exemplified by such “disabled unions” as John’s and Phineas’s in Dinah Mulock Craik’s John Halifax, Gentleman. Citing Persuasion, Schaffer notes that in the disability plot, “courtship is conducted through alleviating others’ suffering, and friendships are formed through mutual assistance” (174). For example, Anne Elliott and Captain Wentworth are knitted by their “exceptional capacities to care for others with similarly empathetic responses to pain” (175), the invalid Mrs. Smith being the conduit for their joining. Charlotte Yonge’s The Clever Woman of the Family exaggerates this “loving interdependency” of invalidism and romance in the Ermine and Colin plot; both their bodies injured, they find that mutual care is love. And Schaffer’s brilliant reading of Maggie Tulliver’s move from sociality to isolation as she is torn between a disabled and romantic suitor in The Mill on the Floss acknowledges George Eliot’s promotion of caretaking and affection as well as her critique of modernity that engenders isolating and individualizing experiences.

Vocational marriage and its short-lived plot type, the subject of the final chapter, follows the argument developed in the previous chapters that demonstrates that familiar marriage orients women to a wider social network, while simultaneously underscoring the fact that women’s desire for meaningful work is doomed in the Victorian novel. The crux of Shaffer’s argument lies upon the Langham Place
cause—the emergence of modern liberal feminism in the mid-nineteenth century. The Langham Place activists popularized the idea that middle-class women were “suffering because the work they urgently needed was consistently denied them” (39). This results in what Schaffer terms the “suppressive hypothesis,” the rewriting of women’s lives as tragic. Reframing one of the results of modern liberal feminism, the chapter asks us to acknowledge this new cultural narrative of incapacitated and declining women: fulfilled, successful working women could not exist. Schaffer supports this rereading with Trollope’s Can You Forgive Her?, Yonge’s The Clever Woman of the Family, and Eliot’s Middlemarch, novels published in the 1860s and engaged with the Langham Place cause. Schaffer reminds us that these middle-class married characters with vocational urges are ultimately silenced, their voices sub-sumed by their husbands’. And it is in part this suppressed desire for meaningful work which, in Schaffer’s reading, leads to the return of the romance plot in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Vocational novels first tease us with the possibility of meaningful work for women, then discourage and critique these fantasies, finally reasserting the climactic romantic union. Depicting its disastrous results, exemplified by Eliot’s Dorothea and Casaubon, the mid-century vocational marriage plot constructs its own impossibility. In all of these “familiar” marriage types, alternatives for women’s lives have significant personal and social benefits, and the turn to romantic marriage is simply seen, for Schaffer, as tragic.

Both Adams-Campbell and Schaffer provide us with engaging and unique perspectives on alternative marriage plots for women that are inherently tied to shifting cultural attitudes about community and nationalism. New World plots that emphasize sociality and flexible marriage arrangements with multiple familial meanings are directly linked to Schaffer’s “familiar marriage” plots that promote social engagement and communal ties and affection. While these communal courtship narratives do not fully survive the nineteenth century, as some of their aspects are subsumed into the romance plot to be re-interpreted as perverse or unsatisfying, both New World Courtships: Transatlantic Alternatives to Companionate Marriage and Romance’s Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction illuminate countervisions to the three-hundred-year history of British romantic marriage plots. In the end, both must acknowledge and reaffirm the persistence and success of the dangerously enticing romance plot, however damaging it is to women’s progress. But with a reframing and reconsideration of alternate domestic arrangements and forms of marriage and family, these studies leave us with a rich and deep perspective from which to consider our own culture’s regulation, policing, and control over marital diversity.