Romance’s Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction

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BOOK REVIEW


Talia Schaffer’s erudite, eloquent study of the nineteenth-century marriage plot asks “What’s love got to do with it?” and takes seriously the possibility that for much of Victorian fiction, passionate love, erotic desire, and romantic fulfillment had considerably less to do with women’s marital choices than we have thought. Schaffer presents a compelling alternative to romance in what she refers to as “familiar marriage,” a form that emerges out of earlier ideals of rational esteem but is characterized by affection, a longing for meaningful action, and the desire to retain community ties. According to Schaffer, familiar marriage is the “rival” of romance not only because female characters frequently face choices between familiar and romantic suitors but because “these two marital ideas competed for over a century [ … ] and it was not at all clear that romantic marriage would win” (8). Rather than understand romance as the telos of marital history, Schaffer directs us to think more fully and fairly about the various urges beyond sex that drove the marriage plot.

Newer, romantic ideals of individual desire did not immediately replace traditional reasons for marriage and, on the contrary—as Schaffer points out—could appear threatening. If marriage was “the sole event of a woman’s life, [ … ] the portal to all future emotional and professional fulfillment,” then it “was not necessarily an act of seeking a new, positive pleasure, but rather of guaranteeing, as much as possible, the minimally necessary conditions for a decent life” (13). Attempting to understand the motivations and desires behind such a life, Schaffer reminds us that other options “might once have felt better than romantic love” (13). Instead of romance’s intense focus on two individuals, familiar marriage emphasized a broader social world of community and responsibility; instead of gravitating toward romance’s passionate immediacy, familiar marriage emphasized past knowledge of a partner and future duties. Familiar marriage offered stasis rather than mobility, stability in place of sparks.

Schaffer’s extremely well researched book engages respectfully with critics and historians of the marriage plot, challenging Lawrence Stone and his followers and building on insights by Ruth Perry, Mary Jean Corbett, Elsie Michie, and others to suggest that romantic marriage, rather than “facilitat[ing] the development of a modern female subject” (23), could also feel “stressful, upsetting, and dangerous [ … ] for women” (23) in the nineteenth century, making the ability to remain within a larger community with a previously known partner seem particularly attractive. In addition to arguing for an understanding of marriage that displaces erotic desire as the primary force, Schaffer argues against the longstanding view of individuality as the impulse behind or byproduct of marital choice. In the novels she describes, networks and communities are as significant as individualism, and vocation is a desire as strong as romantic passion. Following chapters that helpfully theorize and historicize marriage, Romance’s Rival takes up a wide range of canonical authors: Jane Austen and George Eliot most often, as the key voices that set and undo the conventions Schaffer describes, but also Emily and Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, and Anthony Trollope; familiar albeit still less well known authors under study here include Rhoda Broughton, Charlotte Yonge, Dinah Mulock Craik, and Margaret Oliphant. As the multiple works in each chapter make clear, the Victorian deliberation over familiar marriage is no minor, local phenomenon, but
rather surfaces as the ever-present plot point we hadn’t yet named, immediately recognizable now that Schaffer has.

All four versions of the familiar marriage plot that Schaffer describes pose alternatives to women’s lives centered around romantic love. “Neighbor marriage” offers women a fantasy of rootedness, connection, and social influence. Rather than “conservatively reinforce[ ... ] gentry class power during what is otherwise a period of class mobility,” marriage to the local squire posits “the woman as the center of a large household and the linchpin of a community” or even “involve[d ...] in the governing of the nation” (95). “Cousin marriage” in Mansfield Park and Wuthering Heights offers “the restoration of appropriate family feeling in two generations” (142), reversing the trajectory established by contemporary Victorian anthropology, which viewed marriage as moving away from primitive, peaceful endogamy toward more violent exogamy. Fictional fantasies of “disability marriage” offer women access to a community of caregivers and meaningful work as well as the ability to be one who initiates physical contact (165). Reading against models of symbolic castration, Schaffer invites us to see disabled men “not as worrisomely asexual but as attractively befriended” (161). This chapter draws on ethics of care theory, which “imagine[s] human beings as profoundly interdependent” (167), and is for me Schaffer’s most compelling argument against the progressive individualism that familiar marriage unsettles, as well as a clear picture of the dangers of “impos[ing] reductive (and ablest) modern assumptions on a period that actually entertained a touchingly rich range of possibilities about love” (166). Finally, “vocational marriage” plots, like those of marriage to neighbors, cousins, or disabled men, speak to women’s desire to imagine forms of wider usefulness, but unlike the others it is continually rejected by female protagonists. Schaffer attributes that failure in part to feminist advocacy for women’s work that focused on unmarried women in order to placate fears about domesticity’s demise. Ultimately, according to Schaffer, this strategy “made vocational identity into something that competed with romantic love” (213); the imaginative difficulty of attaining both was one of the costs of the early feminist movement.

Schaffer’s book is a field changer for anyone interested in questions of kinship, agency, or desire. It is a significant revision of what desire can mean and also an important testament to the ways that community or an impulse to remain “oriented to a wider world” (199) can operate as powerfully as individualism in the Victorian novel. Unsettling sex as the greatest longing in Victorian fiction promises to challenge more than the marriage plot when we think about women’s other choices—economic, political, reproductive—as not motivated solely by sex or marriage.

Though it may not be critically popular to say so, the earnestness of this intellectually brilliant study is, to me, one of its strongest assets (and there are many). Its effort to understand Victorian novels on their own terms models beautifully what Romance’s Rival urges us all to do: “Those of us who love the Victorian novel should find a way to recognize and respect the kind of love the Victorians espoused” (40). This study should also compel us to recognize and respect the significance afforded to community, family, and work beyond and possibly independent of the marriage plot.

Notes on contributor

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