

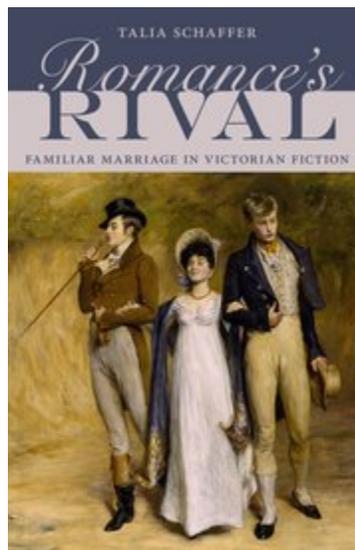
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Guest Edited by Janine Hatter and Helena Ifill



Issues Other than Desire

[*Romance's Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction*](#). Talia Schaffer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. 334 pp.

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<1>Talia Schaffer's *Romance's Rival* rereads the development of the nineteenth-century novel and reveals that viewing the marriage plot through a two-suitor lens (the familiar suitor versus the romantic suitor) allows us to see issues other than desire at play in 'the sole event of a woman's life' (13). Her scholarship exposes how the familiar suitor, a suitor with close ties to the woman in question who could offer something akin to the companionate marriage, is often depicted as the better choice than the romantic stranger who offers sexual passion. Schaffer's text furthers the scholarly conversation about women, love, marriage, and family that has been expanded in recent years by work such as Sharon Marcus's *Between Women* (2007),⁽¹⁾ Mary Jean Corbett's *Family Likeness* (2008)⁽²⁾ and Lenore

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Davidoff's *Thicker Than Water* (2012).⁽³⁾ Collectively, these texts interrogate fictional and historical nineteenth-century relationships, looking beyond desire for other forms of motivation and fulfillment. Schaffer, however, firmly moves the conversation back to the marriage plot in order to upend our traditional readings and explore what she identifies as the counterpoint to the romantic marriage: the familiar marriage.

<2>The first two chapters lay out the definition of familiar marriage and describe the ways in which authors negotiated the dangers of privileging desire over other considerations. 'Theorizing Victorian Marriage,' situates her argument in meticulously researched literary and historical conversations about Victorian marriage. The familiar marriage, as Schaffer defines it, is a literary device rather than a historical trend. Even so, like the companionate marriage, the familiar marriage draws upon the qualities of its eighteenth-century predecessor, the marriage of rational esteem. The familiar marriage departs from these two established ideas of marriage because it is not a lived experience based on an older marriage model; instead, it is a literary device that 'underwent multiple mutations, responding to the particular pressures of its specifically Victorian environment' (3). As Schaffer reveals, the familiar suitor appears throughout Victorian literature. For example, Schaffer employs St. John Rivers and Edward Rochester as prime examples of the familiar suitor and the romantic suitor, respectively. St. John's proposal would allow Jane to cement existing bonds and pursue a vocation; Rochester, on the other hand, offers mystery and sexual titillation. Of course, Jane only marries Rochester once he has become a familiar suitor via disability. Although Jane chooses the suitor who had once been the romantic stranger, Schaffer charts how some familiar suitors are appealing in and of themselves and others, like St. John, serve to make 'needs visible in the novel' (4). The second chapter of *Romance's Rival*, 'Historicizing Marriage, Developing the Marriage Plot', moves to trace how the familiar suitor evolved. Schaffer demonstrates how the familiar suitor came into use in nineteenth-century literature in response to concerns about the new ideal — the romantic marriage. She employs such foundational texts as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Clarissa* to prove how Victorians used the marriage plot and the familiar suitor device in an attempt to ameliorate their cultural anxieties about marriage.

<3>Schaffer's conception of what the familiar marriage offers to women extends broadly because not all female characters are in search of a vocation like Jane Eyre. She clarifies that 'Jane Eyre needs an occupation, Lizzie Bennet needs financial stability, Lizzie Hexam needs a safe haven' (4). These needs rather than desire, according to Schaffer, drive female characters to choose one suitor over another. Through this rereading of the marriage plot, Schaffer attends to a broader definition of women's agency, particularly as it pertains to marriage. 'The familiar marriage,' she argues, 'supported the woman's desire to have a useful life' (9). Familiar marriages arise from and help perpetuate social connections; female characters are enticed by the familiar marriage (or its stabilizing effects) because the familiar marriage offers 'pragmatic advantage: social empowerment, familial benefit, caretaking networks, or career access' (9). Thus Schaffer is able to restore agency to these female characters by working against Freudian and Foucauldian readings that privilege above all else desire and hidden sexual impulses.

<4>Schaffer divides her remaining chapters based on types of familiar marriages: neighbor, cousin, disability, vocational. In each chapter, Schaffer carefully establishes the historical and theoretical framework that allows her to identify and categorize these literary marriages. For example, in 'Neighbor

Marriage: Loving the Squire', Schaffer synthesizes anthropological analyses of romantic marriage with explorations of kinship in literature and German sociology in order to argue that neighbor marriage allows the woman to create and cement ties to the community. The neighbor plot 'offered a fantasy of social centrality and powerful agency' for the female character (115), and Schaffer cites Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (1811) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) as early examples of this. Through references to works by Rhoda Broughton and George Eliot, Schaffer goes on to trace how the neighbor plot loses its appeal over the course of the nineteenth century and disappears when the squire, or 'the financially stable man living on his own estate' (77), is no longer a minor character but a complex one 'endowed with interiority and development' (116), which jeopardizes the woman's agency.

<5>'Cousin Marriage: Reading on the Contrary' and 'Disability Marriage: Communities of Care in the Victorian Novel' unfold in similar ways. In the former, Schaffer offers insightful readings of canonical and popular novels including Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Charlotte M. Yonge's *Heartsease* (1854) to support her claim that cousin marriage enabled women to remain connected to the world at large by 'reinforcing and consolidating family ties that may have been frayed' (123). The latter chapter extends disability scholarship as Schaffer draws upon the theory of ethics of care to argue 'that the disabled subject of the nineteenth century was the center of a social network' (160). Through her careful readings of novels like Austen's *Persuasion* (1818) and Yonge's *The Clever Woman of the Family* (1865), she shows how disability marriage functioned to keep women connected to a social network created by a community of carers. Thus, as Schaffer reveals, the disability plot offers an alternative to the 'monadic persona' we typically associate with Victorian subjectivity (196).

<6>Schaffer's concluding chapter 'Vocational Marriage, or, Why Marriage Doesn't Work' is focused on the narrative inability to conceive or create viable vocational marriages: 'either the vocational marriage will never get realized, or it will turn out to be a terrible mistake' (200). She contextualizes her discussion within the historical framework of a 'discursive explosion' of women's work rhetoric that appeared from roughly 1855-1860 via Langham Place writers. She then draws a parallel between vocational identity and Foucault's ideas about sexual repression to explain how 'women's natural urge to work gets suppressed' and 'the suppressed female subject became the template for imagining a character' (223, 213, 220). Schaffer then traces this pattern of failure throughout nineteenth-century literature, addressing texts like Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-2) and Anthony Trollope's *Can You Forgive Her?* (1864-5). Her survey shows how the cultural condemnation of women's work could dissuade even the most motivated woman from pursuing a vocation; her vocational interests either get redirected to acceptable modes of feminine pursuits or get filtered through her husband's career. She ultimately concludes, 'romantic marriage is the enemy of vocation' because mid-century Victorians could not reconcile the working woman and the family (236). Thus as the nineteenth century ended, vocational marriage, like the other types of familiar marriage, became indicative of 'personal, perverse, humiliating drives' (237) rather than outward-looking opportunities for women.

<7>Schaffer's compelling study traces the familiar marriage plot throughout the nineteenth century, establishing it as a common literary device that gives way to the twentieth-century novel's focus on erotic passion. *Romance's Rival* highlights how reading nineteenth-century novels through the lens of the familiar marriage allows us to address the Victorians' attempt to reckon with the onset of the

romantic marriage and, through this, recognize how motivations other than erotic desire influenced a woman's spousal selection. Her textual explorations highlight character traits and motivations, particularly in female characters, that have often been overlooked due to a focus on sexual desire. Scholars of the canonical and popular Victorian fiction, narratology, gender, and family will find Schaffer's volume engaging and thought-provoking.

Endnotes

(1) Marcus, Sharon. *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007. [\(^\)](#)

(2) Corbett, Mary Jean. *Family Likeness: Sex, Marriage, and Incest from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf*. Cornell: Cornell University Press, 2010. [\(^\)](#)

(3) Davidoff, Lenore. *Thicker than Water: Siblings and their Relations, 1780-1920*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. [\(^\)](#)