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Pursuing the Victorian Honeymoon

Victorian Honeymoons: Journeys to the Conjugal. Helena Michie. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. 288 pp.

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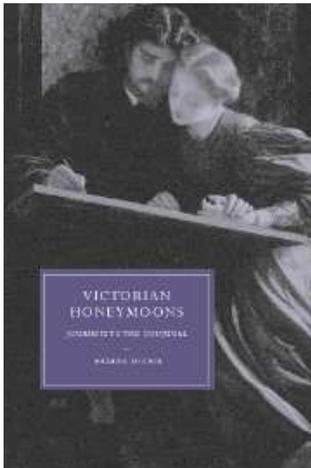
Issue 3.3

<1> In exploring the myriad sexual contexts of nineteenth-century British people, recent studies have conspicuously showed us examples of dissidence, perversion, pornography, or underworld, often posited against a monolithic Victorian sexual norm. Helena Michie's new book, *Victorian Honeymoons*, takes a refreshing approach to the history of sexuality by examining the realm of married life itself. If the interests of current research insinuate that marriage is dull, Michie reinvigorates the topic by turning to the archive to see conjugality as its own rich and complex formation. Honeymoons are the perfect site to examine the Victorian ideology of marriage, as couples make a journey that is both literal and metaphorical from unwed to wedded—a passage with an explicit yet largely unspoken act at its center. Michie's extensive engagement with the archive provides a fascinating glimpse into the everyday erotic world of the middle- and upper-middle-class subjects of her study. Yet the riches of the archive are also ultimately its frustrations, as she is forced to confront the absence of details she would most like to know. *Victorian Honeymoons* raises historical questions that seem to have no clear answer, epitomizing the problems faced by all scholars negotiating the murky terrain of Victorian sexuality.

<2> The first chapter opens with a notorious Victorian honeymoon, that of John Ruskin and Effie Gray. Here Michie provocatively questions the binary of “success and failure” by which scholars have often characterized a honeymoon experience. If the Ruskin honeymoon, famously unconsummated, is a “failure,” does that mean that a parallel honeymoon, brutally consummated and resulting in pregnancy, is a “success”? The chapter goes on to narrate the institutionalization of the honeymoon, providing an excellent account of shifts in the history of marriage leading to the establishment of the wedding journey. A new conjugal ideal emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that was based in middle-class values of domesticity and privacy. The shift can be seen in the transformation of wedding celebrations from large, communal affairs to smaller, more family-oriented ceremonies. Beginning with Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1753 and culminating in the Marriage Act of 1836, the British government stepped in to certify legal unions, erasing the gray area between the single and the married. The honeymoon thus became an important ritual marking the life-changing transition between the two states.

<3> The chapter explores some of the humorous clichés of Victorian honeymoon behavior, in which couples all thronged the same popular seaside resorts, put on embarrassing public displays of affection, and rapidly became bored with each other. Also funny are the marriage conduct guides that outline proper honeymoon etiquette—often alluding to the taboo subject of defloration in circuitous phrasings that Michie deftly analyzes. The chapter concludes by outlining the impressive data she amassed from the archive in her survey of sixty-one honeymooning couples, presented in the form of charts and maps. In two of the most typical honeymoon journeys, couples traveled to the Continent, most likely hiking in Switzerland and then landing in Rome, or else remained in England for a trip to the seaside or Lake District.

<4> Chapter two theorizes the concept of “reorientation,” in which the honeymoon helped the newly-married pair to reorient away from the birth family toward a separate conjugal unit. Michie offers a powerful analysis of diaries and letters to show how couples were molded into what she terms an early and “narrow form of heterosexuality *avant la lettre*” (77). She chooses John Addington Symonds—famous chronicler of his own homosexual life—as a “perverse” yet “exemplary honeymooner,” whose journals clearly reveal the “heterosexualizing imperative” (79). The chapter's second part makes the challenging argument that honeymoon tourism itself worked to cement the conjugal unit by assimilating women's views to those of their husbands. This section felt like something of a missed opportunity. If honeymoons combine sex and travel,



Victorian Honeymoons dwells much more on questions of sex than on those of travel. The discussion never broadens to consider the travel writing genre or Victorian women's travel writing more generally. Michie describes how grooms like Matthew Arnold and Leslie Stephens launched off on their own Alpine adventures while their wives were left back at the hotel, terrified of high mountains or wishing to be shopping in Paris. The only extended woman's narrative explored here is that of Dorothea in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, a novelistic account with its own literary agenda. If anything, these examples point toward a more divisive argument about the different ways Victorian men and women traveled and narrated their experiences, even while on honeymoon.

<5> In chapter three, "Carnal Knowledges," Michie uses the subject of honeymoon sex to make an important contribution to the Victorian sexuality debate. Whereas Michel Foucault, Peter Gay, and Stephen Marcus have argued for a high degree of Victorian sexual awareness, Michie's archival work leads her to a different conclusion. Men and women in her archive stressed the novelty of the honeymoon experience while remaining largely silent on the matter of sex itself. In a sample of 61 couples or 122 persons, Michie finds only seven references to sex, leading her to question the notion that Victorians were actually more experienced or knowledgeable than they appear. In an attempt to outline Victorian sexual epistemology, the chapter proposes a "knowledge tree" of rhetorical questions, framed—confusingly—around how Victorians might have learned about female orgasm. The chapter's best part, and a highlight of the book, comes when Michie attempts to answer a crucial and relevant question: if a literate Victorian woman wanted to learn about sex from books, where might she have turned, and what would she have found? Analyzing sources ranging from popular medical dictionaries to sex manuals, Michie finds mystifications everywhere. Basic questions of anatomy are treated with euphemism and deliberate opacity. This very revealing discussion shows what an untouchable topic sex was for Victorians, even within the sanctity of marriage. One sex manual warns against "abnormal amativeness," depicting the honeymoon as a "nightly repetition of legalized prostitution, sinking the pure, high and holy into the low, debasing and animal" (136). These sources convey a sense of alarm and even terror, delivering a strong challenge to the current revisionist scholarship that has made Victorians seem more like mirrors of our own sexual selves.

<6> The fourth chapter explores honeymoons in literature, a sub-genre Michie aptly labels "Honeymoon Gothic." Literary honeymoons, it seems, always go wrong. They can be counted on to reveal unknown and foul elements of character, to invoke shades of secrecy and violence, and to use the "language and landscape of the gothic" (151). Shelley's *Frankenstein* perfectly encapsulates these elements, as Victor fatally withholds his secret—his monster—from his new bride, only to have her murdered by the creature on her "bridal bier." Both *Frankenstein* and M. E. Braddon's *The Day Will Come*—expertly analyzed here—portray conjugality as "a failed protection against the secrets of the birth family" (152-53). Even more intriguing are Michie's readings of *Daniel Deronda* and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*. While neither of these novels portrays honeymoons, both use a narrative break to indicate that a marriage has taken place and both tell a story in which sexual ignorance leads to awful and violent ends. Michie's analysis of gender relations as a problem in epistemology or "knowledge of the world" seems very fitting for both novels, especially given her earlier emphasis on the honeymoon as a site of sexual revelation. While these readings move away from the honeymoon itself, they are convincing in seeing the honeymoon as a key plot point in a larger narrative about failures in knowledge or communication networks, especially those between women and men.

<7> The final chapter takes the book's most unusual turn. In "Capturing Martha," Michie reproduces the detailed diary of Martha Macready with a thorough annotation of its codes and allusions. Michie's attempt to "possess" Martha also includes an account of the scholar's own adventures in Wales with Martha's descendents, an exploration of the ancestral home, and—most astonishingly—a recreation of Martha's honeymoon experience in fictional form. This final step most clearly signals the literary critic's desire to find in the archive a revelatory narrative, a desire whose thwarting is evident in the book's recurring tropes of incompleteness, speculation, and "frustration with the historical record" (xviii). Funnily enough, Michie's fictional account pauses politely at the bedroom door, again preventing us from knowing what we really want to know. A reader who wanted to vicariously experience a "real" Victorian honeymoon might do better to turn to Ian McEwan's 2007 novel *On Chesil Beach*, where a British couple honeymooning in the 1950s eerily reenacts many of the discomforts and miscommunications traced in Michie's study. The conclusion left me wondering how scholars ought to maneuver through the unknowns of history when the archive fails to provide answers. In the meantime, *Victorian Honeymoons* serves as a welcome exploration of a fascinating if ultimately shadowy historical subject.

