

**Novels and Wives**

*The Marriage of Minds: Reading Sympathy in the Victorian Marriage Plot.* Rachel Ablow. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007. 231 pp.

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<1> Rachel Ablow's *Marriage of Minds* is one of a small wave of sympathy books to appear within the last decade: a group that includes Amit Rai's *Rule of Sympathy* (2002), Elizabeth Barnes' *States of Sympathy* (1997), and my own *Scenes of Sympathy* (2000). These books and a few others, chiefly in American Studies, focus not on what seems to be sympathy's natural purview – the eighteenth century – but rather on the nineteenth, and for the most part suggest the term's relevance to key Victorian concerns such as class and race. Ablow gives this critical plot a surprising twist by attempting to tie sympathy to perhaps that most dominant of Victorian topics – marriage – claiming that marital sympathy in Victorian novels has its parallel in readerly relations to the novel. For the Victorians, Ablow claims, the novel's influence not only supplemented, but also resembled and could stand in place of, the wife's.

<2> Like many of the critics mentioned above, Ablow discovers that a discussion of nineteenth-century sympathy must, given the term's substantial eighteenth-century philosophical and fictional tradition, begin by explaining its nineteenth-century focus. She does so with brief discussions of David Hume and Adam Smith, locating in Smith's impartial spectator an analogy with the sympathetic wife. In nineteenth-century studies, she cites Martha Nussbaum's claims for the novel's role in extending readerly sympathies. One might look as well toward Catherine Gallagher's discussions of character in *Nobody's Story* (1995), and, perhaps less relevant to Ablow's concerns but no less important for discussions of literary sympathy, David Marshall's emphasis on representation in *The Surprising Effects of Sympathy* (1988). Indeed, Ablow tends to emphasize the term itself rather than specific representations of it, leading immediately to problems of definition. She turns to, perhaps not surprisingly, the *OED*, and then simply writes, "In this book, I define sympathy as broadly as possible." Sympathy quickly becomes Althusserian interpellation, and then, more generally, intersubjectivity – "the means by which we become subjects through our encounters with others" (8). It then, to fit the book's thesis, has to become "marital sympathy," which it does via the notion of Victorian marriage as an ideal union of like-minded individuals. Ablow likewise turns to an analogy with the legal notion of coverture, by means of which the wife's property was made over to her husband. The term "sympathy" transfers only weakly to the context of marriage, however, and it's not clear why it is

needed, especially since Ablow's own arguments more often suggest the failures of marital sympathy than its successes (more on that issue below). Some obvious cases in which a novel itself explicitly evokes the idea of a mental harmony or emotional kinship between husband and wife, such as that of Hardy's Jude and Sue, are not discussed.

<3> Individual readings are often wonderfully insightful and occasionally problematic. In the chapter that serves as template for the book as a whole, for instance, Ablow argues that Dickens in *David Copperfield* (1848-50) assumes a "wifely" relation to his readers. "Wifely," as suggested above, means that "the novel attempts to mold readers by making the reader feel like both the subject and the object of an attachment able to supplement or even substitute for the relationship a husband might have with a wife" (19). This claim is grounded in the idea that *Copperfield* attempts to "define a new aesthetic organized around feelings commonly identified with domesticity" (19), seeking "to encourage its readers to experience love rather than a sense of identification" (21); it relies on David's "stupidity" in idealizing Dora, Steerforth, and Agnes. Because David loves these three despite their obvious (to a reader) flaws, Ablow argues, the beloved's "interiority" is irrelevant to his or her "influence" (29). The novel, on the other hand, asking readers for unconditional love, "unlike real wives ... cannot conceal, disappoint, or be mistaken" (43).

<4> But readers have, of course, left ample evidence of their disappointment with numerous novels, including Dickens' – the death of Little Nell and Boffin's pious fraud come immediately to mind. More seriously, Ablow's interpretation slides over the way in which, rather than making Dora's interiority a matter of irrelevance or insignificance, Dickens renders her a clear echo of David's mother. What Aunt Betsey calls David's "blindness" applies not only to his perception of Dora, but also to his replication of the Murdstone/Clara relationship in his first marriage: a scenario that, in the novel's own textbook Oedipal terms, must be worked through before it can be abandoned. Ablow also neglects the way in which an inability to accurately perceive "interiority" – that of a character or indeed another person – may not be sympathy's failure but indeed its definition, at least in Smith's account; the complexities the term "love" brings to the discussion make the relevance of failure even more crucial.

<5> These discussions bring to mind but do not engage the familiar problem of representing female interiority from a male character's point of view. Fictional marriages which might be said to fall within the purview of Ablow's study – idealizing relationships such as that of Dorothea Brooke and Will Ladislaw, or, again, Jude and Sue – could all be faulted on the same score, and in both directions, as each character idealizes the other. In these examples, as in that of David and Agnes, idealization of a second partner is a response to a first disappointing or disastrous relationship or marriage. Indeed, rather than displaying a problematic specific to *Copperfield*, this scenario recalls the one Stanley Cavell, in *Pursuits of Happiness* (1981), describes as characteristic of second-marriage narratives. Ablow's argument relies on the acceptance of a sympathy-love continuum that defines not only Victorian marriage but also novel-reader relations; yet it fails to acknowledge the disappointments that shadow the terms – sympathy, love, idealization – on which it relies.

<6> Did Dickens wish for his novel, as for himself, the uncomplicated love and sympathy, the same overlooking of faults, that characterizes David Copperfield's relation to the objects of his affection? Is there any author who does not? But the claim that this novel will work for readers as Agnes' letters do for David – that readers will be “similarly inspired by what they read, strengthened by it, and encouraged to do what they know to be right” (43) – weakly concludes a chapter filled with strong readings, as in an account of the way interpretation and violence overlap in the figure of Rosa Dartle. Indeed, this pattern is repeated in each of Ablow's chapters, which end with attempts to tie richly detailed and complex discussions of marital relations to the book's central analogy. The effort sets up a kind of riddle for readers – how is this marriage like a novel? – and despite disclaimers that “we” cannot know what readers feel, Ablow's answer to that question often relies on a claim about what readers “must” feel or how they are “made to” respond.

<7> The wife/novel argument takes a different form in each chapter. Ablow's discussion of *Wuthering Heights* (1847), for example, focuses on that novel's resistance to readerly sympathy, which echoes its “antisympathetic” marriages; Lockwood is brought in at the end to serve as reader-surrogate. In contrast to the sympathy argument, this portion of the chapter suggests that the horror of the wrist-rubbing scene between Lockwood and Catherine reinforces readers' sense that text is just text, and that violent impulses may thus be safely directed toward it and expunged through it. The chapter on *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) focuses on the way “futile self-sacrifice reconfigures the relations of those who witness it” (91), a group in which readers are presumably included. And for *The Woman in White* (1859-60), Ablow takes up the relation between sympathy and sensation, once again raising the issue of female characters' interiorities. She usefully suggests here that Walter's insistence on his wife's identity as “Laura, Lady Glyde” ties sympathy to projection and ventriloquism, and later to coverture; more problematic, once again, is the relation between the chapter's argument and the book's thesis.

<8> Indeed, Ablow's readings – including the last, of Trollope's *He Knew He Was Right* (1869) – are frequently concerned with the way a presumed absence of female interiority complicates ideological commonplaces about marriage, especially that of an ideal sympathy between husband and wife. This ground has been covered before, and yet the readings of fictional marriages offered here are strong enough to warrant its revisiting. The attempt to stretch the term “sympathy” to include the reader's relation to the novel is less convincing. What Ablow calls the “wife/novel homology,” that is, often appears less than necessary to, and sometimes in fact requires a swerve away from, a series of complex, interesting readings of marriages in key Victorian novels. The book wants its model, and yet it also seems to want it two ways: to claim that the model works for all novels, and yet that it works differently in each case. But if the parallel between marital sympathy and reader-novel sympathy is to function at all, each example must bear at least some resemblance to the others: sympathy, for example, must remain the operative term, and yet the term is stretched so thin here that it's not always clear why one needs it at all. The effect of the marriage thesis was to keep me guessing at each chapter's punch line: how would this marriage turn out to resemble a reader's relation to the book? I did not always find the answer; try as I did, I never understood how Collins' novel was like a wife to him. *The Marriage of Minds* is an illuminating reading of marital relations in novels; it did not, however, convince me that a novel is like a wife.