

**I Don't: The Failed-Marriage Plot and the Victorian Novel**

*Dickens and the Rise of Divorce: the Failed-Marriage Plot and the Novel Tradition*. Kelly Hager. Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2010. 206 pp.

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<1>In *Dickens and the Rise of Divorce* Kelly Hager argues that critics have remained committed to the courtship plot, promoted by Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel*, despite clear evidence of its inapplicability to the actual plotting of many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels. This is a welcome intervention in the “novel tradition” noted in Hager’s subtitle. Critics of the novel, she argues, tend to focus on the conventional courtship plot and as a result they fail to notice and take account for what she calls “the failed-marriage plot,” the “story of a marriage that disintegrates into mutual alienation or dissolves in separation or divorce” (6). Indeed, “marital failure appears so often in the novel that it constitutes a plot in and of itself” and the “failed-marriage plot,” Hager argues, “was a competing and complementary plot from the beginning of the novel’s emergence in the eighteenth century” (14). Our failure to confront its pervasiveness and importance is, accordingly, a critical oversight in theories of the novel.

<2>Hager begins by providing an overview of the many critics of the novel who endorse the courtship plot despite the good critical reasons they should have for proceeding more carefully. These critics include, in addition to Watt who is Hager’s point of departure, Dorothy van Ghent (in whom Hager finds many interesting resonances with Watt), J. Hillis Miller, Nancy Armstrong, and (more briefly) Mary Poovey, among others. Having established what she considers the hegemony of the courtship plot in theories of the novel, Hager moves on to review a number of novels that are, in large ways and small, at odds with the courtship plot. Her goal is to allow for a more complete reading of many well-known novels — *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Wuthering Heights* (1847), and several others are offered briefly as examples — that have received only “a partial reading” due to our critical predilection for the courtship plot. Two novels, Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) and Trollope’s *He Knew He Was Right* (1869), receive a more extended treatment here. In *Tenant* Hager traces both the intertext of divorce and the explicit trajectories of failed marriage to demonstrate the ways in which courtship plots, critiques of the institution of marriage, and failed-marriage plots all exist in uneasy and competing tensions with each other. And in *He Knew He Was Right* Hager illustrates that the failed-marriage plot is not in tension with the courtship plot at all; rather, “it is the plot” (30). This brief survey (she references eleven novels in this section), she writes, “suggests the frequency and variety with which the novel yields a portrait of a problematic union” (31).

<3>Hager then turns to marriage and divorce law itself. She offers an overview of the changing laws in England from 1670 to 1923 with special attention placed aptly on the pivotal 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act. At the outset she has a wonderfully concise synopsis of the relevant laws in this two-hundred plus year period. Hager notes, wisely, that just as divorce changes over time, so too does marriage and there is no “stable entity” that fully captures what marriage is. But her real focus is divorce law. In 1857, divorce shifted from Ecclesiastical courts to civil courts and became, as a result, much more widespread (although still, by no means, a popular option for failing marriages). Hager offers an interesting account of the legalities of divorces pre- and post- the 1857 law, draws our attention to the expense of the process, to its double standard (whereas a man could get a divorce based on his wife’s adultery, a woman could only get a divorce based on her husband’s aggravated adultery [that is, adultery plus one other infraction— assault, bigamy, desertion, incest and so on are included in this list]). This background serves as the framework for Hager’s interpretation of early- and mid-career Dickens novels and it is these novels that are the focus of the remaining three chapters.

<4>The first of the series of Dickens chapters addresses *Oliver Twist* (1837-38), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838-39), and *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-41). Here Hager is intrigued by what she calls the “monstrous marriages” described in these novels. The monstrous marriage is not, she argues, the core of the novel but it “sets the novel’s plot in motion” (56). The monstrous or failed marriages she discusses are both pivotal to the plot’s development and “obscured,” if not “buried,” by the narration (60). The monstrous marriage, then, is often indirect, tangential, obscure, and, in an analysis of waxworks, uncanny. Hager closes with an anticipation of what is to come: “It is not . . . until the middle of the century [with *Dombey and Son*] . . . that Dickens will present the failure of marriage explicitly and overtly, not as a secret, but as a sensation” (85). Hager takes up *Dombey and Son* (1846-48) in a melodramatic register, noting how Dickens has to resort to melodrama to depict the spectacle of a marriage’s dissolution; in other words, he couches his subject matter in a conventional form that can seem to buffer and soften its inflammatory content. Hager, however, also wants to make a case for *Dombey and Son*’s resistance; to do so, she looks more closely at Edith’s melodramatic and theatrical presentation in the context of Caroline Norton’s personal struggle with marriage and divorce law and her writings on this subject. This intertext is illuminating for the light it sheds on Edith (as more radical than Norton), and on Dickens’s oeuvre itself.

<5>It is in the chapter on *David Copperfield* (1849-50), however, that Hager confronts the novel’s engagement with divorce and failed marriage most directly. She describes *David Copperfield* as a “novel of adultery” and a “novel of divorce” (132). If, as Hager puts it, failed marriage in *Dombey and Son* is “a highly melodramatic and isolated occurrence,” in *David Copperfield* it is “almost a part of the usual order of things” (133). To make this argument Hager focuses on the silences in the texts, those plots “of divorce and desertion buried beneath the novel’s more familiar, conventional plots” (135). Her focus, accordingly, is on the women who want to leave (but significantly, do not leave) their husbands and the difficulties of telling their stories (her observation on the locution “Miss Betsey’s husband” is excellent on this point). Hager’s final chapter has an introductory section on *Bleak House* (1852-53) but, over all, it is dedicated to *Hard Times* (1854) and the “temporary and flimsy” marriages represented in this novel (155). Hager argues here that there are neither courtship plots nor failed-marriage plots in *Hard Times*: rather, Dickens focuses instead on how husband and wives can escape their

marriages. She reads the novel through several extra-literary contexts and in doing so brings out its treatment of divorce and its relation to broader cultural investments. Taken together, these chapters on Dickens not only illustrate Dickens's critique of the institution of marriage and the counter-plotting he develops to tell these alternative stories but also, as Hager notes, they illustrate a shift in Dickens's attention from the failed marriage as peripheral to central to the plotting of his novels.

<6>Throughout, Hager is keenly attuned to the implications of her argument for readings of gender. At the outset she writes that "the failed-marriage plot is a woman's plot—a plot that concerns itself primarily with the matter of female agency" (8). When she turns to her extended reading of Caroline Norton, she does so to rewrite Edith Dombey as a character with much more agency, resistance, and feminist innovation than typically interpreted. Hager can then make a case for *Dombey and Son* as a novel more resistant of dominant cultural norms than we typically think. After all, in Hager's reading Edith Dombey is more feminist than Caroline Norton, one of the century's most impassioned and outspoken, albeit thematically conservative, commentators on divorce law. Overall, she suggests that Dickens's novels are "feminist in that their effect is to educate readers about the woeful state of the law respecting women and marriage" (152).

<7>*Dickens and the Rise of Divorce*, thus, rethinks the novel tradition through the framework of the failed-marriage plot with a focus on Dickens's early- and mid-career novels. Her revisionist argument raises two interrelated questions for me. First, the book seems to pull in two directions. On the one hand, it offers a contribution to Dickens studies as the first half of its title indicates. On the other hand, it suggests a revision of the novel tradition as the second half of the title notes. To be sure, a revision of the novel tradition could be developed from a strong illustration of the former argument (and this is Hager's intention: if she can prove her thesis in relation to Dickens's novels then "we have fairly conclusive evidence that the failed marriage-plot is one of the Victorian novel's favorite stories" [23]). But I found myself wanting a greater sampling of novelists to be willing to grant the second argument. This point, in turn, is related to a second hesitation I had that relates to the definition of the failed-marriage plot and its evidential basis. Can we have a failed-marriage plot in the singular when there are so many versions of how the story of failed marriage is, in fact, plotted? If this plot does conform to a conventional format that is somewhat similar to the courtship plot's conventions of attraction/desire, obstacles, and closure, I would have liked to have seen those conventions outlined. Also, how much space does a novel have to dedicate to the failed-marriage plot for it to merit a displacement of the courtship plot? Or even to put it in competition with the courtship plot? In short, while it makes sense that there are many more plots for the nineteenth-century novel than the courtship plot, I still wanted a better sense of what constituted a failed-marriage plot and how pervasive it, in fact, was.

<8>*Dickens and the Rise of Divorce* puts the "vexing" institution of marriage before the reader in all of its messy complexity. In fresh and lively analyses, Hager demonstrates that the Victorians at once applauded and upheld marriage and critiqued and decried it. These tensions get translated into the novel in ways that are considerably more complicated and troubled than resort to the courtship plot model allows. While Hager focuses primarily on only one novelist, her book should generate new analyses of both the failed-marriage plot (in its many manifestations) and the novel tradition.