

Refamiliarizing Victorian Marriage

Talia Schaffer

In *Jane Eyre* (1847), Jane hears a particularly memorable proposal from her cousin St John Rivers:

God and nature intended you for a missionary's wife. It is not personal, but mental endowments they have given you: you are formed for labour, not for love. A missionary's wife you must – shall be. You shall be mine: I claim you – not for my pleasure, but for my Sovereign's service. (428)

As we might expect, St John's "claim" repels Jane. The cousins do agree that they feel familiar affection for one another. However, for Jane, this sibling relation means they ought not to wed. "You have hitherto been my adopted brother – I, your adopted sister: let us continue as such: you and I had better not marry," she warns (430). For St John, however, their adoptive fraternity necessitates marriage. "We *must* be married – I repeat it: there is no other way; and undoubtedly enough of love would follow upon marriage to render the union right even in your eyes" (433). Jane tries to explain that she does not harbor romantic love for St John. Rather, she feels what she calls, "only a comrade's constancy: a fellow-soldier's frankness, fidelity, fraternity if you like; a neophyte's respect and submission to his hierophant." Unfortunately, the emotions Jane has listed are exactly what her cousin was hoping for. "It is what I want," he said, speaking to himself; "it is just what I want." (433).

What has happened in that exchange? How could the words that Jane thinks rule out marriage, be precisely the terms that St John thinks qualify her for marriage?

In the clash between Jane's expectations and St John's assumptions, we find the expression of a major problem in Victorian ideas of marriage. From Jane's perspective, marriage means, simply, romantic marriage – marriage for love – and St John is failing to live up to that ideal. Indeed, romantic love increasingly became the only acceptable rationale for marriage as the nineteenth century drew onward, until today its hegemony is unquestioned. Thus, she says, "I scorn your idea of love, . . . I scorn the counterfeit sentiment you offer: yes, St John, and I scorn you when you offer it" (433).

But in this article I want to propose that St John is not offering a counterfeit sentiment. Rather, he is offering a sentiment in a different currency, a currency whose value seemed sterling to *Jane Eyre's* original readers. In the nineteenth century, another version of marriage coexisted with the newly popular notion of romantic marriage. What St John is proposing is specifically what I call the familiar marriage model. This article will define the familiar marriage model, discuss its historical evolution, and explore its presence in Victorian fiction. What I want to suggest here is that the central plot of the Victorian novel, the marriage plot, is about love only inasmuch as love is a problem. As Victorian novels obsessively rehearse the clash between romantic and familiar marriage, we see a culture struggling to come to terms with the event that defined its subjects' – above all, its female subjects' – lives.

Familiar marriage is a literary structure in which a marriage is driven by comradeship, not motivated by romantic love or financial interest. It is, as historian Lawrence Stone describes it: a state of mind and not a passion – which is one of settled and well-tried mutual affection. This develops between two people who have known each other for a long time and have come to trust each other's judgment and have full confidence in each other's loyalty. This condition of caring may or may not be accompanied by exciting sexual bonding, and may or may not have begun with falling in love. Indeed, it may well develop after marriage rather than before it. (Stone, "Love" 328)

Such a union offers the female participant security, identity, and a sense of vocation. The suitor's credentials are well known, and easily verified in any case. St John's offer of a comradely union with real work is an example of a familiar marriage.

As St John's example indicates, the suitor is familiar and, very often, familial as well. I use the term "familiar" to emphasize the fact that this marriage builds on, and justifies itself, by the partners' easy mutual knowledge, and also to generate the deliberate echo of "family." Cousin marriage in fiction almost always signals the familiar model. But often, this familiarity can be evoked by a disabled body – a disability which demands the potential partner scrutinize the body in advance and plan for a lifetime of caretaking and compensation. Disabled marriage necessarily requires a level of daily physical familiarity not made necessary by normative marriage. The "familiar" marriage, therefore, gets generated by both consanguinity and disability. Both mean the marriage is built on an intimate and relatively non-erotic knowledge of the suitor's history and body. In Victorian fiction, the safe "familiar" suitor almost always contrasts with a "romantic" suitor – a man like Rochester, a mysterious, exciting, potentially threatening lover, who offers the frisson of the unknown and the charisma of sexual adventure that the familiar suitor fails to present. I use the term "romantic" to name the erotic promise of this figure, while simultaneously alluding to its influential formulation in Romanticism through the figure of the Byronic lover and Wertherian passion unto death. The competing demands of the familiar and the romantic lovers allow a main character like Jane Eyre – and her reader – to work through the period's dueling marital ideals.

This marital conflict is a formation found in Victorian fiction, not necessarily a real practice. Certainly cousin marriage was common in nineteenth-century Britain, as Nancy Fix Anderson and Adam Kuper have demonstrated. It had, after all, been legally and religiously permitted since the Henrician statute of 1540. Victorians did not associate it with incest. Although the historical incidence of cousin marriage lends credence to the literary convention, the particular structure I am discussing characterizes the marriage plot in British nineteenth-century fiction, and should not be assumed to have had widespread historical existence. Reading familiar marriage as a purely literary device in no way renders it less important. If anything, it is perhaps more significant if we regard it as a narrative strategy generated by some way in which the romantic marriage plot failed. In other words, real marriage and its motives are messy and idiosyncratic, and historians of the family have found it hard to isolate trends (Perry 14-21). But in the neater case study of the novel, in which marriage is a symbolic resolution to a cultural problem, it is particularly interesting if that ideal solution seems inadequate. If romantic marriage did all it was supposed to do, fiction would not have needed the familiar marriage plot. Yet that familiar marriage plot, as we shall see, occurs in almost every novel in which romantic marriage appears.

Moreover, because familiar marriage is integral to the marriage plot, it is centrally associated with British fiction during the nineteenth century, the period when that plot reigned supreme. We can find examples of the familiar marriage plot elsewhere, but because the technique was coined, circulated, and collected in the fiction of the Victorian period, these are the novels that best reward investigation. French nineteenth-century fiction, for instance, often canvasses competing varieties of romantic love, but the choice of lovers does not necessarily occur within (or even relate to) marriage. Moreover, as we shall see, the familiar marriage structure responded directly to a peculiarly nineteenth-century construction of marriage. It could not have emerged much before 1800 because the stress that generated it did not yet exist; and it could not linger far past 1900, because cultural and legal changes fundamentally altered the significance of marriage, rendering this device relatively useless.

Familiar marriage can be invoked if anyone with a longstanding familiarity with the main character becomes a suitor, including the person next door, the child of the old family friend, the adoptive sister, the best friend's brother. Roger Hamley in *Wives and Daughters* (1865) and Agnes in *David Copperfield* (1850), for instance, would be examples of suitors who are familiar without being literally related. Similarly, any health condition can produce this effect; it need not be outright disability. Recovery from fever, shipwreck, a stroke, or even the gout, can have the effect of immuring the partner in domestic space, thereby turning the marriage into a familiar union. Sir Michael Audley, Sir Leicester Dedlock, even Casaubon, may not exactly be 'disabled' in the modern sense, but all suffer illnesses that restrict their mobility and require their wives to care intimately for their recumbent bodies.

Familiar marriage need not even be, technically, marriage. In many Victorian novels, the man who offers the familiar marriage option is actually a brother. Living with him would provide companionate partnership with a well-known person, often a safer choice than marriage with a stranger. Victorian writers, notoriously, often pattern marital relationships on sibling ties. Leila Silvana May, Valerie Sanders, Claudia Nelson, and Joseph A. Boone and Deborah Epstein Nord have all described Victorians' fondness for fraternal suitors and speculated on why the brother-sister pair makes for a kind of ideal marriage in the nineteenth century. I'd argue that fraternal love is not intended to make brothers sexual, but rather to make courtship brotherly. Sanders explains:

Given the ambiguous moral status of any male suitor before he has proposed and made his intentions honourable, the attractions of a brother as 'natural protector' are obvious. The brother-as-lover seems a safe alternative to the man who is unrelated to the woman, an unknown quantity, with no common memories and roots. He is above all, morally reliable, and at first, sexually neutral. (Sanders 100)

Tom Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), Charles Edmonstone in *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853), and Frederick Lawrence in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) all provide fraternal cohabitation for their sisters as an alternative to the sisters' marital unions.

In other words, we should take affiliation, disability, and marriage as fluid categories. The point is the emotional affect of the union, not the specific bodily or consanguineous credentials of the suitors, or the nature of the cohabitation. Victorian novelists were creative in the variety of ways

they invented to achieve this end, the companionate relationship. Cousins, brothers, neighbors, gout, shipwreck – plenty of plot devices could induce the familiar marriage plot.

As the fraternal example demonstrates, one key way that the familiar model differs from modern understandings of marriage is that familiar marriage de-emphasizes desire. This does not mean that familiar marriages in fiction were necessarily chaste, nor, for that matter, that they were enthusiastically and frequently consummated. Cousin marriages or suggested cousin matches, for example, which were particularly showcased in Victorian fiction can be found in *Wuthering Heights*, *Bleak House*, *Sylvia's Lovers*, *No Name*, *The Moonstone*, *Aurora Leigh*, Trollope's *The Belton Estate*, *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, *Jude the Obscure*, *The Importance of Being Ernest*, *Mansfield Park*, *The Newcomes*, *The Way We Live Now*, *Frankenstein*, Oliphant's *Hester* and *Miss Marjoribanks*, *East Lynne*, Yonge's *Heir of Redclyffe* and *The Pillars of the House*, and Lucas Malet's *The Wages of Sin* and *The History of Sir Richard Calmady*. They seem to range through the spectrum of possible sexual behaviors, from marriages that produce children (*Bleak House*, *Mansfield Park*, *Jude the Obscure*) to marriages that are explicitly chaste (*The History of Sir Richard Calmady*). Other elements of familiar marriage remain quite consistent throughout these diverse texts, but the variability and obscurity of desire seems to suggest that it was not a significant part of the model. It could be played with, or ignored, where something like vocational need remained central.

The main rationale of familiar marriages did not depend upon erotic desire. It referenced, rather, companionship, alliance, and friendship. If that is what one is looking for in marriage, cousin marriage – to take the most common category of familiar union - has obvious excellences. Cousins are likely to offer each other egalitarian respect. A culture that could endorse cousin marriage may be, I suggest, a culture that cares more about the quality of that daily interaction than about any sex that the couple is or isn't having. Recent work on cousin marriage often focuses on the question of incest, but it is significant that incest is our concern, not theirs. Incest was not an issue, partly because sex was not what cousin marriage was really about. For them, the primary meaning of a cousin marriage lay in its easy companionship; the fact that it involved consummation was a secondary consideration. Claudia Nelson explains that cousin marriage offered a chance to get to know your partner well (because one didn't need chaperones), the promise of harmonious relations with in-laws, and the reassuring prospect of keeping money within the family. These reassurances might well mean more than the risky thrills of romantic love (137).

For those who wanted to pursue forms of desire not permitted by heterosexual marital norms, too, familiar marriage could be a perfect cover. It was a socially sanctioned way of living in amicable, desexualized partnership. By marrying the sibling or cousin of the real object of desire, one could achieve proximity to one's real partner. We see this dynamic in Lucas Malet's *The History of Sir Richard Calmady* (1901), in which marriage with a cousin (who is also disabled) allows Honoria to live with her husband's mother, the woman with whom she has been in love with all along.¹

While it is important to acknowledge that familiar marriage could serve homoerotic needs, we need to make sure we do not reduce familiar marriage solely to the status of a feint. Instead, we need to entertain the notion that the relative sexlessness of the familiar marriage felt attractive to

Victorian readers *in itself*. That does not, of course, mean that the Victorians were too repressed to enjoy sex. It means that Victorians occupied a culture in which it was possible to disregard desire, to *not care* about sex. It is hard for our post-Foucaultian, queer-theory trained modern readers to simply discount sex in marriage, but I think we need to acknowledge the fact that Victorian subjects may have had a fundamentally different attitude. Victorians did not necessarily feel that familiar marriage harbored a lamentable lack of sexual interest, but rather, that it positively proffered a delightfully robust companionship. In Sharon Marcus's important book, *Between Women*, she asks us to read female friendship as a category in itself instead of assuming it was a code for a covert lesbian desire. Similarly, I'd like to read familiar marriage as a strong category in itself instead of seeing it in terms of lack, or assuming it redirects us to a 'real' desire that must exist somewhere else. I'd like to explore what it offered, instead of assuming it was deficient.

A central, positive function of the familiar model is that it offers a vocational future. Margaret Oliphant showcases this advantage in her novels. In *Phoebe Junior* (1876), it is perhaps a stretch to say that Clarence Copperhead's impermeable stupidity constitutes a disability, but it is certainly an impairment that requires Phoebe to manage his parliamentary career, and this prospect constitutes Clarence's greatest appeal. As she says reverently, "he would be a career to Phoebe. She did not think of it humbly like this, but with a big capital – a Career" (300). With a cousin, the work often means managing an estate that this marriage would keep safely in the family. This is the case in another Oliphant novel, *Miss Marjoribanks*, where the heroine is rather dismayed to find herself rejecting a Member of Parliament in the middle of his proposal, because she suddenly realizes that she loves her hapless cousin. However, Miss Marjoribank's disappointment in finding that "after all, it was to be Tom" is mitigated by the bright new idea of setting the Marchbanks property to rights, and sending Tom to Parliament to represent it (477).

The vocational promise of familiar marriage – and the way romantic marriage fails to provide such a future -- is vividly clear in *Jane Eyre*. St John's greatest attraction is that he can offer Jane missionary work. He courts her, not with jewels and silks like Rochester, but with an entry-level job in remedial education and advanced language classes. Where Rochester wants to showcase the erotic appeal of Jane's body, St John wants to test Jane's employability. As he explains: "I have watched you ever since we first met: I have made you my study for ten months. I have proved you in that time by sundry tests : and what have I seen and elicited? In the village school I found you could perform well, punctually, uprightly, labour uncongenial to your habits and inclinations." Observing Jane's money management and her assiduity in studying Hindustani, St John concludes that she will be ideal as "a conductress of Indian schools" (428-429). St John's proposal is, in some ways, rhetorically indistinguishable from a promotion.

Romantic marriage may or may not offer a job, but the point is that the woman is supposedly too enraptured by passion to care. Any woman who paused in the middle of a romantic proposal to inquire what was in it for her, would seem ludicrously selfish. Indeed, Rochester denies or disdains Jane's work. "What, you are my paid subordinate, are you? Oh, yes, I had forgotten the salary!" he exclaims when they first converse (165). Whereas St John admired Jane's teaching in his proposal, Rochester begins his proposal by dismissively calling her a "dependant," who has done her "duty" to her "employer" (279). In this proposal, he sneeringly uses vocational language only to goad Jane into the romantic rhetoric the scene actually demands (279). Yet Jane

refuses to stop working, to Rochester's astonishment (298). Marriage with Rochester offers no new vocation, and indeed threatens the meagre one that Jane already has. But the familiar marriage allows such questions to be discussed without reproach. St John and Jane spend much of their proposal scene discussing her qualifications to run an Indian school. Her employability is the rationale for his proposal, not (as in Rochester's case) an inconvenient condition to be resented while it continues and ended as soon as possible. As Jane's experience shows, the romantic proposal is a shining promise that may turn out to be fool's gold whereas the familiar proposal offers real value that can be cashed in later for a substantive career.

The woman's vocational future is most obvious, however, when her prospective husband is disabled. The woman will nurse the sufferer, or compensate for his impairments with her own eyes, hands, or legs. Once Rochester becomes disabled his wife can be his eyes – and although Jane describes the charming work of putting fields and sunsets into words for him, one assumes that it would also involve the substantive and perhaps more remunerative labor of managing the estate, reading bills, and writing business correspondence. She also achieves easy physical familiarity with him, combing his hair and trimming his nails, for instance. The male body becomes something to care for, not a powerful erotic force. In the last proposal, at Ferndean, Jane will be Rochester's "nurse," a new job that gives her real work in the future, along with her renewed teaching of Adele.

Disability thus plays a powerful role in the familiar model. In nineteenth-century fiction, marriage to a disabled subject can provide everything that cousin marriage or fraternal cohabitation does: companionship, egalitarian bonding, and vocational roles, with sex de-emphasized. It's intriguing that Victorian fiction often presents familiar marriage using disability rather than endogamy. One might wonder, indeed, why disability should be interchangeable with consanguinity in Victorian fiction.

In considering this question, it is important not to reduce disability to a mere cover for some other subject position (to say that disabled men are perforce feminized, for instance), but to read these specifically *as* disabled bodies. Familiar marriage rests on two categories, disability and desexualization, which modern readers usually do not admire much, and it is incumbent upon us to remember that Victorians may well have felt differently. A disabled body, in the nineteenth century, may have been a positive marker of spirituality, sensitivity, emotional accessibility, instead of marking a lack (of health, viability, mobility) as it does in contemporary Western culture. We might think here of the common iconography of the angelic, purified, dying female body, starting with Richardson's *Clarissa*, and including Dickens's *Little Nell*, Yonge's *Margaret May*, and Gaskell's *Ruth*. If nineteenth-century readers valued these situations, we must be careful to avoid assuming they were just covers for other 'real' subjects we find more palatable.

Disability does not, in itself, desexualize the suitor. As Tobin Siebers has recently argued, disability might be seen instead as the site of unusual sexual possibility. Siebers suggests that disability studies could stress the erotic potential of somatic hypersensitivity, immobility, muscular relaxation or constriction, which could enable multiple and alternative forms of pleasure. In nineteenth century fiction, moreover, the disabled were often hypersexualized rather than desexualized. For every high-minded angelic child, there was a demonically perverse male dwarf. For every *Tiny Tim*, we have a *Quilp*, or a *Miserrimus Dexter*, or indeed a *Sir Richard*

Calmady (Hager 73). Disabilities that did not impact mobility seem to have been read as heightening sexual appeal, like dueling scars, or Byron's clubfoot. They drew attention to the body and might even hint at unusual physical prowess, exceptional musculature, to enable mobility in spite of the apparent impairment.

So it behoves us to be specific about the forms of disability implicated in the familiar marriage plot. Let us take the familiar suitors Philip Wakem and Ralph Touchett as our exemplars. The Philip or Ralph character generally has a recurring condition which consigns him to bed periodically. He experiences fever, often delirium, which periodically exempts him from knowledge of his beloved's romantic actions at important plot crises. He is a sensitive observer of tiny emotional signs, although he may not have the strength to act upon what he perceives. He does not win the woman, but he becomes her affectionate fraternal supporter when she chooses the romantic union, and although his condition precludes travelling to her, he expresses his abiding amity through letters. The disabled suitor's difficulty intervening due to his recurrent attacks, his selective knowledge due to his periodic fevers, and the geographical distance that results from his immobility, are really what conduce to desexualize their relationship. It is not a problem with his body, but with space and time. Whereas the affiliative suitor is desexualized due to his intimacy, the disabled suitor is desexualized due to his distance. And the woman's knowledge of his body due to these periodic attacks – her acquaintance with the rhythm of symptoms, the intimacy of pain, and the constraints of capability – create bodily familiarity without necessarily generating sensuality.

As this summary hints, the familiar model is, on the whole, female-identified. That means that the familiar model most frequently has a woman deciding between two men; the novel of disability usually depicts the man as the disabled subject and the woman as the character who compensates for it; the novel of endogamy usually depicts a woman choosing male cousins/siblings. Indeed, most of the texts I have invoked thus far were written by women. Prominent examples include *Emma*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and *Middlemarch*. Sometimes a male chooses between a safe familiar female suitor and a charismatic but dubious exogamous woman. We might think of Edmund Bertram choosing between Fanny and Mary; Captain Wentworth deciding between Anne and Louisa; Roger Hamley's vacillation between Molly and Cynthia; Archibald Carlyle selecting Barbara versus Lady Isabel. Dr. Bretton chooses between god-sister Lucy and Ginevra, then later between cousin Polly and Lucy. Yet even in these cases the marriage plot is written by a female author, and narrated from the point of view of a female participant, usually the familiar suitor, waiting in mute anguish to see whether the man will be misled by the lovely and dubious stranger. It may therefore still be read as a female-identified plot, even when male characters get written into it.

Male-authored fiction often portrays cousin marriages, but such unions may or may not have the emotional investment in issues of security, vocational future, and egalitarian respect that I identify as central to the familiar model. We may think, for instance, of Ada marrying her cousin Richard in *Bleak House* (1852-1853). It is a cousin marriage, but it does not fit the familiar model in any other respect. Richard is not a safe well-known prospect, nor is he competing with a charismatic exogamous suitor. The cousinship offers Ada no vocational prospects (if anything, it debars her from the use of her own money and renders her helpless as Richard spends it). The

cousinship, in this novel, functions more to delineate their respective involvements in the lawsuit than to give Ada an emotional opportunity for a particular kind of future.² On the other hand, in *David Copperfield* Dickens scripts a classic familiar marriage plot in the choice between the flighty Dora and the adoptive-sister Agnes. In *Can You Forgive Her?*, Trollope freely re-engineers the familiar model. Alice Vavasour is courted by someone who is both a cousin *and* disabled, yet the scarred George is the wild and dangerous suitor, while the exogamous wooer, John Gray, is the safe choice. One might also see the brief period when George Osborne, affianced to the old family connection Amelia Sedley, is entranced by the siren Becky Sharp, as a familiar-model moment. Nevertheless Thackeray, Dickens, and Trollope appear not to have felt an urgent emotional drive to work through the familiar model's concerns, leaving them free to use it sometimes but also sometimes to rearrange it. For these male authors it generally served as a convenient convention, not a crux.

For women writers, however, familiar marriage was often needed to solve a crucial anxiety. It is perhaps one of the most insistently re-used literary structures in nineteenth-century women's writing. If there is a marriage plot – and of course there almost always is – it generally involves a familiar courtship, with an urgency and a passion that itself demands our attention. In the currency of the marriage plot, familiar marriage is the gold standard, the original guarantee to which more dubious forms of specie need to compare themselves. The familiar marriage plot emerges when a novel is written from the point of view of someone for whom marriage constitutes a possible, shocking, loss of identity and property and place – someone for whom marriage means a new name, a new family, a new home – and for whom that unknown future might well be terrifying.

Indeed, much of the best recent work on Victorian marriage plots stresses the extent to which fiction traces the dangers and disasters of the married state (see, for example, Hager, Furneaux, Ablow, Michie). As Kelly Hager points out, everyone from Queen Victoria to John Stuart Mill to Charles Dickens viewed marriage with alarm (1-5). The Victorian novel, according to Hager, is as obsessed with failed marriage as it is with courtship, if not more so. Ruth Perry writes about the sense of panic that might accompany the nuptials:

Romantic love-in-marriage as an ideal developed in English culture as women were increasingly isolated from their consanguineal kin and the communities of their youth. In the fiction of the day characters wailed their dismay at their vulnerability to the absolute authority of the men they married. . . . The newly privatized marriage – privatized in the sense of private ownership as well as seclusion in domestic space – detached a woman from her family of origin and from her pre-existing friendships and concerns in order to put her at the service of being a companion to her new husband. (196-197)

Perry's description reminds us that romantic marriage was raw, new, and frightening in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth century.

In the modern period in Western Europe, there were two major shifts in the meaning of marriage. The first, in the seventeenth century, has been the subject of great dispute amongst historians of the family. The second, in the nineteenth century, affects us much more closely, yet it has scarcely been studied at all. A brief review of this history will show how romantic marriage and familiar marriage evolved, and just why they needed to develop against one another.

In the medieval and early modern period, as the historian Ralph Houlbrooke has argued, “a suitable marriage, especially among the propertied classes, was one which gave the individual and those closest to him potentially useful new kinsmen...” (73). Romantic attraction was no reason to wed. In fact, “passionate love was widely condemned as irrational and disruptive. According to Peter Idley, expressing a view already old when he wrote in the mid-fifteenth century, its malign influence set a man on fire and deranged his wits” (Houlbrooke 77). Rather, marriages that advanced the interests of the individual or that individual’s kin were the goal.

However, in the seventeenth century, people began to put their own personal happiness ahead of self-interest or kin interest in choosing a marital partner. Consensual marriage became popular in all classes except the aristocracy and royalty, where enough was at stake to keep marriage a form of alliance. That was an enormous change, and has received a great deal of attention, much of it from the highly controversial work of Lawrence Stone.³ The new consensual marriage practice meant that marriage started to center on the nuclear family, rather than being a public alliance contracted to benefit the wider kin network. Randolph Trumbach calls this the “affective family” (Ruth Perry prefers the name “privatized marriage”), to commemorate the way the newly formed family often tended to live in a town away from their original community (Trumbach 113, Perry 193-194). This arrangement required individuals to assess potential suitors’ moral credentials, seeking, in Stone’s words, “personal affection, companionship and friendship, a well-balanced and calculated assessment of the chances of long-term compatibility, based on the fullest possible knowledge of the moral, intellectual and psychological qualities of the prospective spouse, tested by a lengthy period of courtship” (Stone, *Family* 271). Such an arrangement seemed superior to the marriage of interest, in which partners wed for political or economic benefit. Interest might bring together two people who actively disliked one another too much to collude. But a marriage of companionship was also clearly preferable to the marriage of romantic love, in which partners’ personal feeling occasioned lifelong unions. Romance might create unstable and dangerous emotions, leaving people yoked together who ought not to be connected.

We can see this fear of romantic love and preference for companionate union clearly in Jane Austen’s first novels, which were written in the late 1790s and published a couple of decades later, *Sense and Sensibility* (published 1811) and *Pride and Prejudice* (published 1813). *Sense and Sensibility* pushes Marianne away from her overwhelming passion for Willoughby towards companionate marriage with Colonel Brandon. Marianne, famously, is “born to discover the falsehood of her own opinions” of the superiority of romantic love. She has to learn “with no sentiment superior to strong esteem and lively friendship, voluntarily to give her hand to another!” (352). In *Pride and Prejudice* Charlotte’s decision to marry Collins purely for interest is viewed sympathetically but sadly; her choice is understandable, but it is not ideal. But Lydia’s passionate romantic elopement with Wickham is wholly reprehensible. This sort of love destroys a family and a society. Austen endorses neither marriage for interest nor marriage for romantic love, although romantic love comes off worse. It is Elizabeth’s and Jane’s prudent, sober marriages that are idealized – and of course it takes time for Darcy and Lizzie to assess each other properly, and to explain their deductions to one another when they have finally united.

In Austen, good unions are predicated on the individual’s assessment of their prospective spouse’s managerial aptitudes, moral reliability, and temperamental discipline. They are love

matches, yes, but not in the helter-skelter runaway romance style of Lydia's or Marianne's first entanglement. Good female characters in Austen novels may feel such impulses towards charismatic strangers, but a sign of their merit is their ability to conquer such feeling and redirect their emotions to more appropriately companionate mates. Marianne's marriage becomes a test of her character; if she remains immured in her tempestuous yearning for Willoughby, she will not be worth the readers' affection, just as Lydia, with her erotic passion for Wickham, is beneath contempt.⁴

However, Marianne's daughters and granddaughters will be free to be as romantic as they can possibly desire. For the nineteenth century saw an enormous shift, as big as the move to companionate marriage two centuries earlier, and far less studied. Wendy Jones explains:

In the nineteenth century. . . cultural imperatives led to the elevation of love over companionship as a marital motive, a view we still accept. Nineteenth-century writers. . . shifted the terms of valorization towards passionate love, although they never completely rejected companionship as an acceptable basis for marriage. (6)

For the first time, romantic/erotic desire was widely endorsed as the only acceptable motive for marriage.

We can see this shift dramatically if we compare *Sense and Sensibility* to a novel published fifty years later, Rhoda Broughton's *Cometh Up As a Flower* (1867). Broughton rewrites *Sense and Sensibility* for a mid-Victorian readership whose priorities had changed drastically. In both cases, a tempestuous, impoverished, romantic younger sister flings herself into a passionate affair with a mysterious, handsome, military man whose poverty may prevent his marriage. The girls have only one parent, who overidentifies with the younger's madcap passion and thus cannot control her. Instead, the calmer elder sister patiently redirects her sibling towards an amicable match with a perfectly kind, trustworthy neighbor. Nell, like her predecessor Marianne, must learn "with no sentiment superior to strong esteem and lively friendship, voluntarily to give her hand to another!" Yet what is a happy ending in Austen is an unmitigated tragedy in Broughton. *Cometh Up As a Flower* derives its great emotional power from the reader's outrage at this ending. The elder sister is an unspeakable villain. The younger sister dies from the pain of her misplaced marriage. By 1867, *Cometh Up as a Flower* banks on readers' assumption that familiar marriage was a fate worse than death, and its startlingly vivid language helped sear that lesson further into readers' minds.

This new requirement to marry for love could be extremely risky. What if one fell in love with a scoundrel, like Helen Huntingdon in *Tenant of Wildfell Farm*? What if he had a terrible secret, like Rochester? What if he was unable to support a family, or gambled, or drank, like Wickham? What if he used his legal power to abuse and exploit his wife and children, like Heathcliff? What if one misjudged one's feeling and discovered it wasn't really love, like Cosima in George Paston's *A Writer of Books* (1898), in which case one was essentially prostituting oneself? Moreover, the doctrine of coverture meant that the woman lost all independent legal identity, being wholly absorbed into her husband. She had no recourse against him, and no property or rights beyond him. The companionate marriage had at least had the advantage of subjecting the suitor to careful scrutiny by the woman and her family. That coin could be examined and tested. But now the woman was being encouraged to bet her entire future based on an irrational,

fluctuating feeling rather than a reasoned assessment of the man's qualities. Who knew if he would be genuine metal?

Given these anxieties about romantic marriage, it is not surprising that the seventeenth-century companionate marriage ideal survived into the nineteenth century. But as we have seen, its form altered. In Victorian fiction, companionate marriage became affiliated to kinship relations; a husband was explicitly supposed to be brotherly or fatherly. Familiar marriage is the specifically Victorian variant of the older model of companionate marriage. [It's a good question why this happened. I don't really know. I'm going to think about it. But for purposes of this article I certainly don't have any idea yet I'd be willing to advance in public.]

We can see the shift to kinship relations in *Lady Audley's Secret* (1861-1862), if we compare two of its non-romantic marriages. Lady Audley's companionate marriage to Sir Michael Audley is suspicious; her willingness to marry an eligible bachelor without feeling anything more than grateful affection for him indicates worrisome cold-bloodedness, rather than prudence as it would in Austen's world. Yet when Robert Audley in turn contemplates companionate marriage with a perfectly acceptable individual, his cousin Alicia, the prospect seems so suitable that nobody (including Robert) can comprehend why he refrains. What *Lady Audley's Secret* shows is that companionate marriage becomes acceptable if, and only if, the marriage is contracted with a family member.

The endogamous romance is central to Victorian fiction, according to Mary Jean Corbett. In her important book, *Family Likeness: Sex, Marriage, and Incest from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf*, Corbett argues that marriage within the family represents "a compelling alternative to the romance between strangers that most critics have taken to be the paradigm for the heterosexual marriage plot" (vii). Indeed, she describes the battle between the emergent model of romantic exogamous love, and the residual model of endogamous love, as a process that took the whole nineteenth century to resolve. Corbett writes, "we forget too easily the force and scope the now-anomalous alternative plot of marriage within the family had for Austen's original audience" (55). Corbett's argument reminds us that intrafamilial marriage had been the norm before the nineteenth century and remained attractive throughout our period. It is not a marginal case, it is a strong tradition that took decades to subside and that provided a reliable, consistent currency through the mess of dubious and unverifiable specie of romance.

No wonder the familiar model was widespread. It offered a comforting continuity from an older tradition. It helped articulate an alternative to the frightening new requirements of romantically based marriage. It fantasized a future for women that involved meaningful work, dependable partnership, and continued interaction with her consanguineal family, rather than leaving them for an unknown and potentially dangerous conjugal pairing. When we note the ubiquity of the familiar plot, we can realize something: the marriage plot is not about romantic love, but about romantic marriage versus the familiar marriage.⁵

Quite often the romantic suitor transforms into a familiar suitor. When dangerously powerful, aggressive, dominant males become disabled they can thereby float into something more like a familiar romance. Eugene Wrayburn's exogamous danger gets quenched by his near-drowning. Romney Leigh in *Aurora Leigh* is already a cousin but must also become disabled before he can

settle down to appreciate Aurora's vocation properly. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Darcy proves his marriageability by voluntarily acting as a member of Lizzie's family, supporting the Gardiners and resolving the Wickham scandal. He inserts himself into her kinship networks.

However, the most famous example of what we might call 'familiarization' is, of course, Edward Fairfax Rochester. His disability changes the terms of the marriage profoundly. In the first proposal, Rochester had insisted "my equal is here, and my likeness," but the reality of their class and gender disparity creates a terrible power differential, as we see almost immediately, when Rochester redefines her as a piece of property whose possession must be secured: "I have her, and will hold her" (282, 284). This marriage poses a threat. We do not want Jane Eyre to become Rochester's "doll," or for that matter, his bigamous mistress. But in the second proposal, Jane explores a different vocabulary. She "meant more than friends, but could not tell what other word to employ" (469). So she attempts several others: "I will be your neighbour, your nurse, your housekeeper. I find you lonely: I will be your companion – to read to you, to walk with you, to sit with you, to wait on you, to be eyes and hands to you" (460). This is the language of familiar marriage. The romantic marriage with Rochester must be flattened and filed and notched until it resembles the supposedly counterfeit model of marriage that St John had originally offered.

Readers witness romantic unions smoothing down into familiar comfort, but we also view familiar unions glowing with new romantic glamour. When the woman marries the familiar suitor, it is often only after a period of distancing that makes him a sort of a stranger. In *Miss Marjoribanks* (1866), for instance, Cousin Tom comes back from ten years in India unrecognizable, with a beard and a fortune. Roger Hamley likewise needs to be sent to Africa and back, bearded and tanned, before he can see Molly afresh in *Wives and Daughters* (1865). In other words, the familiar lover must take on some of the excitement of the stranger, while the stranger must become habituated.

The profoundly satisfying conclusion of *Jane Eyre* – and *Pride and Prejudice*, and *Miss Marjoribanks*, and *Wives and Daughters* -- is that the woman gets *both* romantic and familiar marriage. The two models converge; one might say they marry each other. To make a romantic suitor into a safe member of the family was the aim of the Victorian marriage plot, as it was, indeed, the aim of marriage itself. How could one imagine becoming so linked to a stranger as to be his closest kin, or, in Jane's words, "absolutely bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh" (476)? The marriage plot used familiar marriage just as much as it used romantic marriage to perform this strange alchemy. Although rivals, they reshape each other. Whether the character starts as a stranger or as a cousin, he must acquire some of the virtues of the other side, to become a viable marriage partner. Any account of the marriage plot that neglects the familiar suitor is leaving out half the story. The Victorian marriage plot was not about loving the unfamiliar, but about familiarizing oneself with love.

Notes

¹ This kind of triangulation is reminiscent of the homoerotically-charged competition Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick famously describes in *Between Men*, or the fraught rivalry Rene Girard

traces in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*. Sedgwick and Girard both show how rivalry over a woman can really be about complex emulation, desire, jealousy, and yearning between the two men. While fully acknowledging this fact, I am interested in exploring another aspect of triangulation, namely, the reason why it became central to imagining marriage. Sedgwick in particular reads from the perspective of the male rivals, rather discounting the woman (she is just the excuse or the conduit “between men”). But I ask what happens if we read this triangle from the woman’s point of view. In that case, we need to inquire why her story so often requires two suitors, and what that might say about the state of Victorian marriage.

² Of course, we don’t get much of Ada’s point of view. Trollope, too, could do a classic familiar plot. The Hetta Carbury-Roger Carbury-Paul Montague triangle in *The Way We Live Now* follows that model.

³ Most problematically, Lawrence Stone has claimed that family love was invented only after 1660. Many literary critics continue to rely on Stone’s formulation, although it has received devastating critiques from other historians. In an unforgettable review essay, Alan Macfarlane reveals Stone’s selective use of evidence and his decision to ignore enormous quantities of data that do not fit his theory, including medieval and Tudor documents and the entire literary tradition. Stone himself subsequently modified the claims put forth in *The Family, Sex, and Marriage* in “Love.” No serious historian or literary scholar can today credit Stone’s assertion that before 1660, family relations were characterized by indifference or cruelty, or that personal affection, kind parenting, private life, and the nuclear family only emerged after 1660. However, Stone’s characterization of the consensual marriage and his seventeenth-century dating of that innovation concurs with the work of most other historians of the family, even those who most vehemently disagree with him, like Randolph Trumbach, Ralph Houlbrooke, and Ruth Perry.

⁴ I am treating erotic desire as part of the romantic model because, that is how they were primarily conceptualized in the Romantic era. Marianne and Lydia are Romantic subjects, ready to sacrifice all for passion, indignantly contemptuous of the soberer marriage of familiar affinity. Later in the nineteenth century, romance and eros came to bear a more complicated relationship to each other in texts like *The Mill on the Floss* or *Wuthering Heights*, where women like Maggie Tulliver or Isabella Linton experience overwhelming erotic attraction that is distressingly independent of romantic love, or even approval or liking. But in the early nineteenth century, Romantic literary conventions tied these feelings very closely to one another. Moreover, the literary convention of the desexualized familiar marriage ended up making romance look erotic by comparison.

⁵ Jean E. Kennard discusses “the two-suitor plot,” pointing out, correctly, that “the convention of the two suitors exists in some form in almost every novel with a central female character, particularly if the term *suitor* is used loosely...” (12). Kennard addresses the convention of the untrustworthy vs. the exemplary suitor in Austen, although she reads them somewhat differently than I do; she sees them as embodying qualities that the heroine must embrace or relinquish, and does not connect them to familiar or romantic models.

Works Cited

Ablow, Rachel. *The Marriage of Minds: Reading Sympathy in the Victorian Marriage Plot*. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2010

-
- Anderson, Nancy Fix. "Cousin Marriage in Victorian England." *Journal of Family History* 11:3 (1986): 285-301.
- Austen, Jane. *Sense and Sensibility*. Ed. Ros Ballaster. London: Penguin, 2003.
- Boone, Joseph A. and Deborah Epstein Nord. "Brother and Sister: The Seductions of Siblinghood in Dickens, Eliot, and Brontë." *Western Humanities Review* 46:2 (Summer 1992): 164-188.
- Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre*. Ed. Q.D. Leavis. London: Penguin, 1966, rpt 1988, first ed. 1847.
- Corbett, Mary Jean. *Family Likeness: Sex, Marriage, and Incest from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2008.
- Furneaux, Holly. *Queer Dickens: Erotics, Families, Masculinities*. New York: Oxford UP, 2010.
- Girard, René. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure*. Trans. Yvonne Freccero. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.
- Hager, Kelly. *Dickens and the Rise of Divorce: The Failed Marriage Plot and the Novel Tradition*. Burlington: Ashgate, 2010.
- Houlbrooke, Ralph A. *The English Family 1450-1700*. London and NY: Longman, 1984.
- Jones, Wendy. *Consensual Fictions: Women, Liberalism, and the English Novel*. Toronto: U Toronto Press, 2005.
- Kennard, Jean E. *Victims of Convention*. Hamden CT: Archon Books, 1978.
- Kuper, Adam. "Changing the Subject – about cousin marriage, among other things." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14 (2008): 717-735.
- May, Leila Silvana. *Disorderly Sisters: Sibling Relations and Sororal Resistance in Nineteenth-Century British Literature*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2001.
- Macfarlane, Alan. *History and Theory* 18:1 (Feb 1979): 103-126.
- Michie, Elsie. "Rich Woman/Poor Woman: Towards an Anthropology of the Nineteenth-Century Marriage Plot." *PMLA* 124:2 (March 2009): 421-436.
- Nelson, Claudia. *Family Ties in Victorian England*. Victorian Life and Times Series, ed. Sally Mitchell. London and Westport: Praeger, 2007.
- Oliphant, Margaret. *Phoebe Junior*. Ed. Elizabeth Langland. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2002. First ed. 1876.
- Oliphant, Margaret. *Miss Marjoribanks*. Ed. Elisabeth Jay. London: Penguin, 1998. First ed. 1866.
- Perry, Ruth. *Novel Relations: The Transformation of Kinship in English Literature and Culture, 1748-1818*. Cambridge: CUP, 2004.
- Sanders, Valerie. *The Brother-Sister Culture in Nineteenth Century Literature: From Austen to Woolf*. Hampshire: Palgrave, 2002.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.
- Siebers, Tobin. *Disability Theory*. Ann Arbor: U. Michigan Press, 2008.
- Stone, Lawrence. *The Family, Sex, and Marriage in England, 1500-1800*. NY: Harper & Row, 1977.
- . "Love." *The Past and Present Revisited*. Abingdon: Routledge, 1987, 327-43. Reprinted from *Passionate Attachments: The Essential but Fragile Nature of Love*, ed. E.S. Persons and W. Gaylin. NY: Free Press, 1987.
- Trumbach, Randolph. *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family*. NY: Academic Press, 1978.