

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Romance's Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction* by Talia Schaffer

Review by: Stefano Evangelista

Source: *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 112, No. 4 (October 2017), pp. 991-992

Published by: Modern Humanities Research Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5699/modelangrevi.112.4.0991>

Accessed: 26-09-2017 10:42 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*Modern Humanities Research Association* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Modern Language Review*

of how cultural exchange functioned in the seventeenth century, and to a more nuanced understanding of seventeenth-century fiction.

LA TROBE UNIVERSITY

PAUL SALZMAN

*Romance's Rival: Familiar Marriage in Victorian Fiction.* By TALIA SCHAFER. New York: Oxford University Press. 2016. xvi+334 pp. £41.99. ISBN 978-0-19-046509-4.

Two of the most influential theories of the nineteenth-century English novel, presented in Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957) and Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), established a parallel between the rise of individualism in British culture and the rise of the marriage plot. In her latest book, Talia Schaffer sets out to revise these arguments. She starts from the observation that nineteenth-century English fiction is in fact pervaded by relationships that elide erotic charge: heroines opting for marriages that are not meant to satisfy sexual desire but rather lead to security, safety, and stability, consolidating structures of familiar kinship. Schaffer's point is that by recovering the overlooked 'familiar' marriage plot, we can come to a more nuanced understanding of Victorian ideas of love as well as uncover a 'history of alternative female subjectivity' (p. 23), which is less bound up with the standard narrative of the nineteenth-century rise of individualism.

Schaffer is particularly interested in novels that stage a clash between two different types of marriage, in which a woman is asked to choose between a 'romantic' suitor who embodies the promise of personal pleasure and a 'familiar' one, whose appeal is instead that he will be able to connect her to larger social networks. Examples include Rochester and St John Rivers in *Jane Eyre*, Grandcourt and Daniel in *Daniel Deronda*, and Gilbert Osmond and Ralph Touchett in *Portrait of a Lady*. These and similar novels, by presenting readers with the two alternatives, enabled them to explore their own agency as modern individuals, making them conscious of the extent as well as limits of their rights and desires or, as Schaffer would have it, propelling them towards modernity.

The book starts with chapters on the theory of marriage and the evolution of romantic love in British history. Schaffer persuasively shows that the Victorians lived in a period that saw a major historical shift in the understanding of marriage, broadly from a convenience model aimed to guarantee a woman's entry into a social nexus to a romantic one that was meant to satisfy the sexual desires of a couple, the latter having a particularly strong appeal for the middle classes. The two models lived side by side for a long time—hence their rivalry in fiction. She then turns to examine in detail a series of familiar marital setups: neighbour marriage, cousin marriage, disabled marriage, and vocational marriage. Each chapter starts from Jane Austen, stressing her legacy to Victorian fiction, and Schaffer pushes the boundaries of her analysis as far forward as E. M. Forster via most of the canoni-

cal Victorian novelists (the Brontës, Eliot, Trollope) as well as some less-studied authors, such as Dinah Craik and Charlotte Yonge.

Schaffer's polemics are not only aimed at established Anglo-American theories of the novel, but also—and more boldly—at psychoanalysis, sexual liberation, Foucauldian critique, and queer theory, all of which have led us to regard the familiar marriage choice as a type of perversion. By contrast, she wants readers to see familiar affection for what it is, rather than a foil for more secret, deviant, and darker passions as psychoanalytic and queer critics have done; and, by so doing, to recuperate types of subjectivities and emotions that, while prevalent in Victorian fiction, are more difficult to read now. This is tricky territory, because few would want to see important interpretative strategies elaborated over the course of the twentieth century to be completely undone by 'surface' readings (which Schaffer invokes more than once) that refuse to go against the grain of the Victorian mind. But Schaffer moves skilfully in a difficult field by rigorously historicizing her readings, never patronizing the Victorians, and bringing in unusual strands of contemporary theory, such as feminist ethics of care, on which she draws in her chapter on disability. The critical verve with which readers will already be familiar from Schaffer's earlier *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late-Victorian England* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000) is at work here again when she navigates the social and emotional pay-offs of familiar marriages, asking us to rethink assumptions of feminist and gender criticism, as for instance when she argues that the emergence of a modern, liberal, middle-class feminism in the mid-Victorian period ironically sparked fictional narratives of women's failures and incapacities.

TRINITY COLLEGE, OXFORD

STEFANO EVANGELISTA

*The Poetry of Robert Browning.* By BRITTA MARTENS. (Readers' Guides to Essential Criticism) London: Palgrave. 2016. ix+173 pp. £18.99. ISBN 978-0-230-27332-0.

This book packs an impressive amount of helpful guidance into a small space. It offers brief introductions to publications, often very recent texts by up-to-date young academics, which students may wish to consult. Great established figures in the field are well represented too. Harold Bloom's famous work on 'the anxiety of influence' is given appropriate space (pp. 5 ff.), as is Robert Langbaum's *The Poetry of Experience: The Dramatic Monologue in Modern Literary Tradition* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1957), the remarkable and still indispensable study of Browning's dramatic monologues. The selection from Browning scholarship does have some odd gaps and unbalanced emphases: the great biography of Browning by William Irvine and Park Honan, *The Book, the Ring and the Poet: A Biography of Robert Browning* (London: Bodley Head, 1975), is mentioned in the bibliography but not discussed; and Honan's study of the dramatic monologues, *Browning's Characters: A Study in Poetic Technique* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961)—second in importance only to Langbaum's—is not mentioned at all. Again in the context of dramatic