
Author: Heidi Turner

Affiliation: Azusa Pacific University

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Abstract: *Romance's Rival* provides a re-reading of Victorian marriage plots as pursuing goals other than passion. It argues for familiar marriage, or the marriage of those close to one another, whether in proximity, familiarity, or blood relations, as a preferred alternative to romantic marriage in the Victorian period. The new categories introduced are neighbor marriage, cousin marriage, disability marriage, and vocational marriage, all allowing women different kinds of agency, community, protection, and purpose.

Keywords: Victorian England, Victorian Literature, Austen, Brontë, Marriage, Familiar Marriage, romance

Author Bio: Heidi Turner is a graduate student at Azusa Pacific University, where she studies creative writing, British novel, and postmodernism.

Author email: hbtturner13@apu.edu
Talia Schaffer offers a radical revision to the structure marriage plot and its purpose in Victorian literature as a tool to explore the changing ideas of what marriage was for and why one would be married. *Romance’s Rival* argues that the transformation of marriage from a community/family event to a personal choice based primarily on erotic feeling was a slower process than indicated by previous research, and that the Victorian marriage novel provided a way to examine the modern romantic man against older versions of marriageable candidates transformed into the ideal suitors, falling under the term “familiar suitors.” Schaffer uses texts by Austen, Yonge, Eliot, and the Brontës (with some texts from other authors inserted in particular cases) to define the following categories of familiar marriage characters pursue or reject: neighbor marriage, cousin marriage, disability marriage, and vocational marriage. Its largest theoretical contribution is a pre-Freudian and pre-Foucaultian reading of Victorian literature, particularly with regard to explicitly romantic plotlines, and proposes a return to “just reading” the texts. In this reading, erotic desire may be present in a marriage, but is not necessary, and female characters choosing a spouse are allowed numerous socially acceptable reasons for doing so, whether it is Lizzie Bennet marrying for Pemberley or Jane Eyre marrying to care for Rochester.

Schaffer structures her work around the central idea that marriage was, at one time, one of the few areas of agency offered to middle-class women. She refutes the linear marriage revolution proposed by Stone and instead insists on a messier version of the changing ideas of marriage, one that novelists had to sort through as well as politicians, families, and individuals. She uses Austen as her primary genre-defining author for reasons of chronology as well as contribution, especially to Yonge’s work. Her research covers multiple historical marriage accounts ranging from Lévi-Strauss to the modern day as well as an insistence on “just reading” the original texts, which she proposes is the only way to remove the Freudian sexual motivations now over-inserted into works originated in a time very different from both our own and Freud’s. Her conclusions, nuanced and defined thoroughly throughout the work, stem from the base thesis that women had more than one reason to marry and that esteem was considered better grounds for marriage than passion well into the late 1800’s. In the following discussion of chapter topics, added evidences gleaned from multiple similar works and smaller case studies have been omitted.

Chapter 1 creates a legible theory of Victorian marriage while moving toward a new understanding of the opposing forces acting upon the female characters who must select a husband. She also defines “familiar marriage” in this chapter as a marriage in which esteem for the man himself as well as approval of her family and the continuation of community are the highest factors in choosing a husband, not passion; as Schaffer points out, marriages may involve desire (used interchangeably in this work with eroticism or passion) but may not at the outset. Chapter 2 carries the main weight of historicizing the Victorian view of marriage and returning the reader to a different worldview, though historical work necessary for each topic is also done. Chapter 3 then defines the neighbor marriage plot as the pull between the “squire next store” and a dashing outsider, putting Wickham against Darcy, and later against Mr. Collins. Schaffer does not insist that no passion can exist between the familiar and the woman, but that the passion is not her primary reason for choosing him; that Lizzie is...
attracted to Darcy is less important than that she can envision having a purposeful life as mistress of Pemberley. Chapter 4 explores cousin marriage, in which the original family ties and community are allowed to be completely preserved by the marriage of two close relatives rather than forcing the woman to give up her name and community in favor of a romantic escape; this is naturally foregrounded by a brief history of the concept of incest, followed by a re-reading of *Mansfield Park Wuthering Heights* in the second generation as successful cousin marriages as well as Lizzie’s rejection of Collins to be ungrounded on a purely cultural basis. Schaffer also reminds the reader here that Victorian relatives were allowed much freer communication that those courting, giving cousins a natural advantage. After explaining a possible view of disability in Victorian England as well as the ethics of care most often seen in novels of the period, Chapter 5 analyzes the appeal of marrying a disabled man as an attempt to find egalitarian relations in marriage, as well as a provision for a lifelong vocation and female agency, especially in matters of touch. While Schaffer does continue her discussion of Austen, here she uses non-marital marriages, such as the relationship of Phineas and John in *John Halifax, Gentleman*, to demonstrate the normalcy of live-in, familiar care from friends and relatives as well as romantic interests before entering her primary discussion of Jane Eyre. This and the previous chapter are perhaps the strongest in both contribution and persuasiveness, as cousin marriage and disability marriage exist far outside modern sensibilities, requiring Schaffer to rise to the occasion in her discussion, as she does. Chapter 6 examines the only marriage plot created almost exclusively for failure, the vocational marriage, or a marriage built around the wife’s ability to support or create her husband’s career; both Mr. Collins and St. John Rivers propose this to their heroines. She uses the Langham Place feminist movement as a lens for interpreting why married women working was not seen as successful and briefly points out the effect of believing that women can work or marry, but not do both, on history. It is important to note as well that Schaffer does not posit that any of these forms of marriages were often (or ever) realized in their novel form by real women; rather, she proposes that all of these forms of familiar marriage are literary devices used to explore changing ideas, though based in probability and some fact.

*Romance’s Rival* proposes a feminist reading of Victorian literature that does not require the women to be exclusively victimized (though this happens often enough, such as in *Clarissa* and *Middlemarch*). Instead, Schaffer operates under the supposition that these characters are able to use their few resources and moments of agency to create their own lives. In this way, Schaffer returns the marriage plot to the heroine and makes it her story explicitly, rather than a roundabout story about men. She also re-figures the primary motives of marrying characters, allowing readers to believe the characters in a way almost unimaginable in Freudian and post-Freudian literary analysis.