## VICTORIAN Honeymoons

JOURNEYS TO THE CONJUGAL

HELENA MICHIE

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#### Preface

I have been working on Victorian Honeymoons long enough to have had conversations about the project with many different kinds of people in many different kinds of places: on airplanes, from facedown on a massage table, in grocery stores, at museums and record offices, and at academic conferences. It is the academics who joke that there can be nothing to say on the topic. What they mean, of course, is that they think "nothing happened" on the typical Victorian honeymoon, and what they mean by "nothing" is that there was probably no sex, or somehow that there was no sex that counted (it was not good enough, expert enough, fun enough, talked or written about enough). This book, as it turns out, does involve a certain amount of counting - of how many people in my sample of sixtyone couples who took their honeymoon in the period from 1830 to 1898 went to Europe, for example, or, more bewilderingly, of how many women likely got pregnant – but the project is in many ways an attempt to get beyond what I think of as honeymoon accounting, especially the binary kind that positions sex against no sex, consummation against the failure to consummate, successful against unsuccessful honeymoons.

But I am beginning with the endpoint of my project's own honeymoon journey. Although my project ended up questioning the calculus of honeymoon accounting and its constitutive binaries of success and failure, it began – as does Chapter I – with a honeymoon infamous for having failed (and one for whose failure one person was held publicly accountable). I came to the topic of honeymoons through the story of Victorian art critic, political philosopher, and Victorian sage John Ruskin and his bride, Effie, and through the many stories of their wedding night told and retold by the Ruskins themselves, by their families, friends, and legal representatives, and by twentieth-century scholars of John Ruskin and of the Victorian period more generally. Although, for many reasons that I discuss in Chapter I, John Ruskin was not, perhaps, representative of many Victorian husbands, the stories piqued my curiosity in ways that

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extended beyond what has become the Ruskin "case" to consider how the wedding night might have been experienced by other Victorian couples. Imagining the "typical" wedding night for the period requires, I think, an almost Victorian investment both in the work of the imagination and in realist detail. I tried - as I try throughout this project - to "realize," as Victorian actors might say, the pressures that might have been experienced by many, perhaps by most, middle- or upper-middle-class Victorian couples thrust suddenly together, in many cases at some geographical distance from their families of origin and the familiar landmarks of daily life. I thought first – and this was borne out by future research - of how tired many of them might have been. For those going to Europe, it was common to take a train to Dover and to stay for at least one night at one of the large and anonymous hotels that overlooked the English Channel and - on a fine day - the dim outlines of a future destination. For those traveling domestically, the journey was often completed in one day, following a morning wedding. The logistics of travel might have been complicated by a sense of geographical and bodily disorientation as couples would be expected to move in the course of a long day from the requirements of public spectacle at the wedding to the very different exigencies of withdrawal into the contradictory "alone together" of life as a couple.

There would, of course, have been sexual pressures, both anticipatory and in the moment. While some honeymooners would be relatively ignorant of the mechanics or even the existence of sex, and while some would be more experienced and/or more knowledgeable, most of them would have felt that the wedding night was a crucial and potentially transformative moment, perhaps with implications for the rest of the marriage and for their gendered sense of themselves. Apart from – although perhaps intricately connected to – issues of sexuality would be issues of space, body, and privacy: how were these men and women to negotiate dressing for dinner, dining à deux, sharing a hotel room or rooms, bathing, praying, or resting with someone at newly close proximity?

Finally, there might have been the pressures of expectation, of negotiating personal desires – whether for sex, rest, or food, say – with a sense of obligation derived from the culture at large. In other words, the wedding night – and again I do not mean only the metonymic act of sex – would be influenced by the participants' expectations of what such a night should be like; it would also be influenced by what they knew or imagined about sex, marriage, religion, and the proper relations between

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men and women. In this sense, as well as perhaps in the more typical one, the wedding night and its ritual of firsts would be performative: the new husbands and wives would be measuring themselves and each other against standards from books, images, and conversations.

And, of course, these standards and expectations would be different for women and for men. The lived experiences of Victorian honeymoons unfolded in the context of a sexual double standard that was far more tolerant of men's premarital sexual experimentation than it was of women's. For men and women of some sexual experience - and particularly for women - this might have added the burden of guilt and perhaps deception to a ritual defined by novelty and transformation. The vast majority of reports from my sample, however, do not comment upon previous sexual experience, even for men. With the exception of a brief mention of one wedding night in which the bride discovered that her husband had syphilis, all my accounts either ignore the possibility of male sexual experience or address the question in the idiom of ignorance, confusion, and surprise. But honeymoons could also be gendered in more subtle ways: I argue, for example, in Chapter 2, that the experience of landscape, particularly the natural and historical "sights" of Europe, might, for reasons of education, access, and power, have been very different for the men and women of my sample. Women were expected to negotiate landscape differently: in the Swiss Alps, for example, most women rode mules while their husbands - and often also their guides walked beside them. Women were far more likely than men to spend parts of the honeymoon alone indoors: several of my longer honeymoon accounts by women detail the process of waiting for their husband's return from a walk, a sightseeing experience, or an errand. In some ways, of course, these different roles suggest a rehearsal of marriage, but some dynamics of excursion and return were specific to the honeymoon context. Women on the honeymoon also tended – with some exceptions – to be more closely in touch with friends and relatives; since women were typically responsible for correspondence with those left behind, we see more acutely, perhaps, their struggles with separation from previous lives.

Many notable elements of the Victorian wedding night might still be in play today. I want to argue, however, that, despite recent revisionary accounts of Victorian gender relations suggesting that engaged couples spent more time together and that Victorians in general might have had more sexual knowledge than was previously thought, Victorian women and men experienced the physical and psychic intimacies of the honeymoon in a way that stressed the novelty of the experience.

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Relatively new as well, but on a larger scale, were the historical expectations of marriage as the privileged form of emotional intimacy; Victorian couples would be caught up in a variety of ways in a discourse of newness, even if, for example, they had to one degree or another been physically intimate before the wedding.

My second interest arising out of the Ruskin example has to do not with Victorians but with the scholars who study them, with the persistent interest of Victorianists in the hows, whys, and wherefores of (for example) John Ruskin's behavior on the wedding night. How do scholars of the Victorian period manage the information they are able to obtain and that which is inevitably unavailable? What claims are they able to make about the representativeness or even the importance of this "failed" wedding night? What kinds of assumptions allow Ruskin scholar Mary Luytens, for example, to compare John and Effie's wedding night to the contemporaneous failed political revolutions of 1848? What is the relation of the most indicatively private of moments to public discourses of history?

My double interest in the wedding night as a historical phenomenon and as a way of thinking about the possibilities and limits of historical scholarship led me to what historicist literary scholars have learned to call, in the somewhat mystifying singular, "the archive": to repositories of Victorian family papers, to the letters, diaries, and other domestic documents written by people living in the period. All too quickly I came to the limits of that archive: there were very few detailed accounts of wedding nights. Whether that scarcity was due to the disappearance over time of intimate letters and diaries or to infamous Victorian propriety, I do not and cannot know. Since wedding nights in Victorian fiction are also infrequently represented in detail, often occurring between chapters or books, I suspect that the relative silence about wedding nights also had something to do with the genre limitations for both fictional and nonfictional texts.

My way into the wedding night was, again, a way out. It helped, I found, to consider the wedding night in context, not as a single dramatic event, but as one night among many nights and days that constituted that most Victorian of institutions – the honeymoon. While there is very little primary material on the wedding night, I found much more on honeymoon journeys, some explicitly and attentively marked as such, some treated in letters and diaries like any other journey for health, business, or pleasure. The move from wedding night to honeymoon as my object of inquiry opened up the scope of my project in a number of

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ways: it gave me access to a wealth of new material, both visual and textual; it allowed me to write against climactic and binary narratives and to see sexual consummation as only one of the potentially transformative elements of the honeymoon; it allowed me to take advantage of some of the rich theoretical and ethnographic work on travel published in the last twenty years; and, most importantly, it encouraged me to think of the history and conduct of the honeymoon in terms of both time and place. As I began to take the honeymoon seriously as a ritual and as an institution, I became more fully and richly aware of how it placed bodies in relation to each other, to culture, and to landscape.

The goal of this book has been precisely to elaborate a variety of contexts for the definitional sexual work of the honeymoon and to identify the honeymoon's larger cultural work of transformation. Honeymoons were, of course, supposed to include sex and were, to some extent, defined by this expectation; they also, however, required a more comprehensive adjustment of self to what I came to call, after thinking about a number of roughly equivalent terms, "conjugality": the expectation not only that Victorian husbands and wives depended primarily on each other for support, affection, and interaction but that they defined themselves away from the birth family and the community and in terms of the conjugal couple. The honeymoon, as I discuss in Chapter 2, became an important vehicle for the transition or "reorientation" from one identity to the other.

The new directions of my work put me in conversation both with scholars of sex and with scholars of marriage (not often the same people and rarely, to my surprise, in direct conversation with each other). In thinking about the sexual experiences of nineteenth-century honeymooners, I found myself working out my relationship with the new revisionary history of Victorian sexuality that, for the last twenty years, has begun to challenge assumptions about Victorian ignorance and prudery. My analysis of this debate appears in Chapter 3, as I take up the specifically sexual experiences of the men and women of my sample. Because of the honeymoon's central position in histories of marriage that depend, like Lawrence Stone's, on a shift toward more affective marriages in the late eighteenth century, I have also had to confront the historical novelty of conjugality and its implications for larger histories of marriage. I offer some comments on this issue in Chapter 1.

A word about the methodology of this project. Although *Victorian Honeymoons* depends to some extent on archival sources and to a larger extent on a historical case study to which those archival materials

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contribute, my training as a literary critic makes my treatment of historical material - published and unpublished - different from what it might have been had I trained as a historian. I see this potential difference working in at least two different areas. The first, where I think the difference is perhaps less significant, has to do with the relationship between the historical materials on honeymooning and fictional representations on which I also rely. While Chapter I focuses on historical material and Chapter 4 exclusively on fiction, the middle chapters consider the two together. Like a historian, I try not to use fictional representations as evidence of the way things really were; like a historian, I try to see novels as expressions of attitudes and ideals not only of the particular author but of the culture in which the author is, however uncomfortably, situated. I am, however, unlike most historians, also profoundly interested in questions of genre and writerly convention: in how choices about what kind of text to write influence what one says or thinks one can or should say. While the genre of the marriage-plot novel in which most of my fictional examples of honeymoons are embedded produces specific readerly expectations, so too, I argue, do diaries or letters. I try at all times to be attentive to the requirements of genre, even and especially in the rare cases where I see people trying to flout or to change them.

The second difference I see between this project and a hypothetical treatment of the subject by a historian is my willingness to look for - and to find – latent as well as manifest content in my sources. In other words, I am as attentive to how people say things as I am to what they say through figurative language or favorite words, for example. My method also involves paying attention to what people do not say, or do not say clearly: to euphemisms, blanks, awkward syntax, even mistakes in spelling or chronology. When the prose of a letter or even a conduct book becomes suddenly complex, garbled, or purple, I see this as signifying, at the very least, an uneasiness with the topic. While this method of reading is associated with the methods of psychoanalysis, I never – well, except in Chapter 2 with Minnie Thackeray's horror at the specter of a mountain poking its head through the window and in Chapter I with a conduct book's reference to the horror of stray curls - refer to a standard psychoanalytic model. I rarely suggest a one-to-one "translation" of a euphemism, and I resist, when I can, the triumphant identification of phallic imagery or double entendres. Throughout the writing of this project I have been very grateful to historian colleagues who have occasionally (and very gently) rebuked me for "over-reading." For Preface xvii

example, one colleague objected to my suggesting a psychosomatic explanation for the frequency of honeymoon illness in my case study, suggesting instead that travel of all kinds would involve, especially in the Victorian era, exposure to different water, foods, and germs. In this case I not only listened but withdrew my speculations. There have been times, however, when I have used a passage from a letter or a diary previously quoted in a work by a historian and have ended up treating it quite differently. A passage in Chapter 3, in which Margaret Gladstone receives a letter of sexual advice from her sister is one example. In her wonderful book, Women, Marriage, and Politics, Patricia Jalland quotes the passage, as far as I can tell, for the first time. Although, to my mind the passage, which has to do with how to manage the hymeneal blood, is filled with images of disease and foreboding, Jalland does not comment on the passage, moving immediately after she quotes it to a declaration that Margaret's marriage was a happy one. Although I have no argument with Jalland's conclusion about the success of Margaret's marriage, I found that I could not ignore the tone of the passage or stop myself from reading with and against its syntactical intricacies. Such a reading complicates, although it by no means negates, the journey to marital happiness as it is recorded by Jalland. I suspect that many other literary scholars would also have succumbed to the temptation to read strongly, and to linger in the uneasy verbal constructions of Bella's advice.

Symptomatic readings of the sort I practice here constitute, I think, disciplinary flashpoints for historians and literary critics; they need to be taken seriously as indicating real methodological differences. I think of my literary training as supplying me with a distinct set of skills that allow me to see all kinds of texts as productions of unconscious as well as conscious desires, as efforts, in other words, to exercise control over and, in the case of my honeymooners, as ways of rendering palatable by social standards elements that might be difficult, painful, or taboo.

The book is divided into five chapters. The first lays out a variety of contexts for the institutionalization of the honeymoon, including historical developments in ideas about marriage and Victorian ideas about and ideals for the honeymoon as expressed in popular materials like conduct books. It is also the chapter where I introduce and begin to analyze my sample. The raw data for the sample can be found in the Appendix in the form of a table. The second chapter introduces the concept of "reorientation," outlining what I take to be the primary cultural work of the honeymoon: the movement away from the birth family to an affective, legal, and social identification with the conjugal

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couple. This is the chapter most overtly concerned with tourism and the consumption of landscape. In it I suggest that one goal of the honeymoon is the production of a unified "conjugal gaze" in which men and women – and the visual burden is mostly on women – learn to align their views of landscape and the historical and natural "sights" of the wedding journey.

While Chapter 2 places sexuality in the context of other - always eroticized – forms of reorientation, the third chapter explicitly takes up the issue of honeymoon sex. It is in this chapter that I think through the relation of my findings to traditional and revisionist notions of Victorian sexuality. I find it helpful, here and in the following chapter, to think of the work of the honeymoon in terms of what I call "carnal knowledge," or "carnal knowledges," - those new ideas, feelings, and pieces of information brought together under the rubric of the sexual. I find myself relying on the plural form "knowledges" - its awkwardness echoing George Eliot's resonant term "privacies" to describe relations between public and private knowledge - to embody one of the central arguments of the book: that knowledge is not singular but made up of ideas and attitudes that are always partial and often in conflict with each other. Chapters 3 and 4, then, in their different ways, attempt to construct an epistemology of the honeymoon. The fourth chapter turns from historical to literary materials and specifically to five fictional texts that are part of a genre I call the "honeymoon gothic," in which honeymoons are the (often violent) sites for the exploration of sexual or financial secrets. I argue that honeymoons, with their link to ideas of carnal knowledge, are ways of representing competing and usually gendered epistemologies.

While I ask questions throughout the book about the limits of what we can know about the private lives of Victorians and about the limitations and expectations of the archive, the final chapter reflects most acutely on the impossibility of perfect historical reconstruction. It uses an exemplary case – the honeymoon diary of Martha Rolls Macready – to dramatize the problem of what we can and cannot know. The diary, written in 1840, is the most detailed and sustained I came across – but it is by no means self-explanatory. Filled with secrets, coded references, and tantalizing blanks, it defies any notion of completeness. The first part of the chapter is an annotated edition of Martha's diary; the second part, the last section of the book, is a frankly fictional reconstruction of some moments from the five-month honeymoon. The fictional ending is both a sign of my frustration with the historical record and a way of positing and thinking through different kinds of truth.

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Because the structure of the book is topical, texts or people tend not to be confined to one chapter. I think of the book as structured in part by revisitation: in particular, three "visitors" appear in several different chapters and contexts. George Eliot's Middlemarch - to me the primal scene of fictional honeymoons - appears in Chapters 1 and 2, reflecting Eliot's own commitment to thinking about honeymoons and, indeed, marriage from different literal as well as figurative points of view. Eliza Dickinson, a honeymooner who articulates the case histories' most melancholy account of sexual initiation, appears also in several contexts; her brief words about her wedding night haunt this book, appearing in Chapters 1, 2, and 3. Finally, and even more hauntingly, Martha Rolls Macready appears in four out of the five chapters, and her experiences, as I come to understand them, constitute Chapter 5. The book records through its structure as well as through explicit commentary the pull of Martha's story as I struggled with the epistemological and generic issues raised by the honeymoon. Other real-life honeymooners make brief appearances in multiple contexts; for the convenience of the reader I have included in the Appendix a list of chapters in which various honeymooning couples appear. This column of the Appendix hints at a sort of counterstructure to the book, which, I hope, can be read across chapters as a series of short narratives about real-life couples.

My final words on methodology have to do with a term I use, perhaps too easily, as a shorthand for the time frame in which these honeymoons took place. As many scholars of the period have noted, the term "Victorian" covers a long period of years brought together somewhat arbitrarily by the figure of one woman - in many ways a figure head - who happened to outlive, or at least to out-reign - her fellow English monarchs. My examples from the beginning and the end of the period feel quite different to me. This is partly due to crucial developments in the technologies of travel; when my chronologically last honeymooner, Maud Sambourne, appeared on a bicycle in her letters to her mother, I felt very much as I did when reading a late novel by Mrs. Humphrey Ward in which a telephone suddenly went off, breaking and reshaping a textual silence that I had long seen as definitional of the Victorian novel. Improvements in travel certainly led to more honeymoons - and to the possibility of shorter and cheaper honeymoons. But the difference is more than a matter of statistics or even of the sound of bicycle or telephone bells; there are other new sounds as well: new slang, new euphemisms, new ways of thinking and speaking, and an explosion of books on sex and sexuality. While I end Chapter 3 with two honeymoons from late in the xx Preface

century, I return to the relative quiet of 1840 and of the peaceful seaside resort of Littlehampton to revisit – for the final time – Edward and Martha Macready. Participants neither in the "Regency spirit," as one commentator puts it, of some earlier honeymooners nor in the emerging standards of new womanhood at the end of the century, the Rolls-Macready honeymoon has the last quiet word.

Over the years, I have inflicted *Honeymoons* on so many audiences, and have shown or talked through parts of the project with so many colleagues that I am filled with fear as I write this that I will forget someone who needs to be thanked.

I am in no danger of forgetting what I owe to my colleagues at Rice in the faculty workshops that have been the center of my intellectual life for fifteen years: Nineteenth-Century Enquiry (NICE) and the Feminist Reading Group (FRG), both of which were supported for much of that time by Rice's interdisciplinary Center for the Study of Cultures. I am deeply grateful to Logan Browning, Karen Fang, Alan Grob, Deborah Harter, Janice Hewitt, Natalie Houston, Thad Logan, Robert Patten, and Lynn Voskuil from NICE and Lynne Huffer, Elizabeth Long, Susan Lurie, Carol Quillen, and Paula Sanders of FRG for the challenge and support they so consistently offered. I am especially grateful to Martin Wiener of NICE for the help he gave me as I took on my first sustained archival project. When negotiating what we at NICE have come to call "disciplinary flashpoints," I often find it helpful to imagine an interlocutor from history: I am extremely fortunate that my imagination of such an interlocutor has been shaped by Marty's generosity, his wide knowledge, and his respect for disciplinary difference.

This project would not have taken the shape it did had it not been for my friends and colleagues at the Dickens Project, who pulled me back into the nineteenth century and persuaded me that I was, if not a Dickensian, at least (once again) a Victorianist. I was fortunate to be sitting next to Joseph Childers when I conceived the idea for the book. Although skeptical of originary moments, I have returned many times fondly to this one and to our excited and exhausted listing of novels with bad honeymoons. Thanks to all in the orbit of the Dickens Universe who provided the intellectual and personal context for many other moments of inspiration, including Murray Baumgarten, Rosemarie Bodenheimer, Allison Booth, John Bowen, Janice Carlisle, Jay Clayton, Eileen Cleere, Carolyn Dever, Ed Eisner, John Glavin, Johnathan Grossman, John Jordan, Gerhard Joseph, James Kincaid, Joseph Litvak, Teresa

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Mangum, Paul Morrison, Robert Newsom, Rob Polhemus, Hilary Schor, Rebecca Stern, Ronald Thomas, and Robyn Warhol. I think it is appropriate to thank someone twice (especially when he appears in such different clothes according to context). Thank you, Bob Patten, the Dickensian.

Over the ten years I have worked on this project, I have been the beneficiary of the research, computer, and textual talents of three wonderful research assistants: Basak Demirhan, Duncan Hasell, and Louise Penner. I thank them for all their many contributions. As usual, Theresa Munisteri has been invaluable in the editing of the book. I have also had wonderful experiences in libraries and archival collections across the UK and the US. Special recognition must go to Tony Hopkins of the Gwent Record Office and Rolf Zeegers of the Littlehampton Museum, both of whom went far beyond the call of duty to help me with images and permissions. I am also grateful to the helpers with the living archive, Pamela Baker, Colin Cowles, and Barbara Shelton of the Rolls Golf Course and Hotel. They will find themselves acknowledged in a different way in Chapter 5.

Closer to home, I can only admire the flexibility and patience of my family. Many academics with children know the pleasures and frustrations of the vacation that is also a research trip (finances kept, of course, scrupulously discrete). Paul and Ross Michie-Derrick have followed me to vacation sites probable and improbable. (Fortunately the Victorians had excellent taste in honeymoon destinations, although seemingly less canonical preferences in terms of where they deposited their records.) I thank Ross and Paul for patiently dropping me off and picking me up at archives in the UK, for killing time by playing soccer and miniature golf in the drizzle of English and continental summers, and for displaying (somewhat quizzical) good cheer in the face of their mother's professional commitments.

The presiding genius of those trips was my husband, Scott Derrick. From our early holidays in graduate school, to our own honeymoon (resolutely archival), to the many journeys literal and metaphoric of the recent past, he has been for twenty-five years my ideal traveling companion. I have finally written the book that can be dedicated only to him.

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