Dickens and the Rise of Divorce

The Failed-Marriage Plot and the Novel Tradition

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It's hard to know how to thank Tom Otten; all the things I want to say are Walworth sentiments, and I know that he, like Wemmick, firmly believes they belong there, not on this page.

I never congratulate any girl on marrying; I think they ought to make it somehow not quite so awful a steel trap.

The Countess Gemini in Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881)

Wedlock is a padlock,
When you're married to a no-good man.

Laura Lee, "Wedlock is a Padlock" (1971)

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Introduction

In May of 1858, in a letter to her daughter Vicky, Queen Victoria wrote, "I think people really marry far too much; it is such a lottery after all, and for a poor woman a very doubtful happiness." Seven months later, in another letter to Vicky, she wrote, "I think unmarried people are very often very happy—certainly more so than married people who don't live happily together of which there are so many instances." And two years later, in May of 1860, she wrote to Vicky again about the shortcomings of connubial bliss: "the poor woman is bodily and morally the husband's slave. That always sticks in my throat. When I think of a merry, happy, free young girl—and look at the ailing, aching state a young wife is generally doomed to—which you can't deny is the penalty of marriage" (Hibbert, *Queen Victoria in Her Letters and Journals* 104, 105). These excerpts from her letters to her (newly-wed) daughter reveal that the Queen, symbolic center of the culture and one of the most public advocates of the domestic sphere and its delights, regards marriage with deep skepticism. Despite her very public advertisement of her own marriage (and her prolonged and extreme mourning of her husband), she calls matrimony a lottery and likens it to a physical illness.

The Queen was not, of course, alone in her distrust of, and discomfort with, marriage. In *The Subjection of Women* (an essay Mary Lyndon Shanley calls "one of the most devastating critiques of male domination in marriage in the history of Western philosophy"), John Stuart Mill also compares marriage to slavery and argues that women are forced to submit to the tyranny of matrimony because society only gives them a "Hobson's choice" ("that or none") when it comes to determining their future (Shanley, "Marital Slavery" 230, Mill 156). Indeed, Mill's celebrated essay focuses almost exclusively on women's subjection as it relates to marriage and might more accurately be titled *The Subjection of Wives*. Mill's emphasis on the conjugal in theory and in practice is clear from the first paragraph, where he announces his conviction that "the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes—the legal subordination of one sex to the other—is wrong in itself," to the slippage in his language throughout from men and women to husbands and wives, a slippage which reveals that when he says men he really means husbands, and when he speaks of women, he is quite specifically referring to those who are married (125). That is, even when Mill refers to men and women and so posits the individual *as* an individual, he is actually assuming that these men and women are husbands and wives. For instance, Mill's assertion that the present system of subordination has lasted so long because it is "not confined to a limited class, but common to the whole male sex" gives way, in the next sentence, to his admission that this power is especially seductive because it is not power in the abstract but, rather, power that "comes home to the person and hearth

of every male head of a family" (136). Whereas Mill's use of the word "women" might signal that attention will be paid to governesses and other unmarried female domestics or to the economic exploitation of women who work in factories, the essay maintains an almost obsessive interest in the plight of wives, women who

> live under the very eye, and almost, it may be said, in the hands, of one of the masters—in closer intimacy with him than with any of her fellow-subjects; with no means of combining against him, no power of even locally overmastering him, and, on the other hand, with the strongest motives for seeking his favour and avoiding to give him offense. (136)

Further, Mill's detailed explanation of the benefits to "mankind" that would result "if women were free" quickly boils down to an explanation of how his proposals will improve "the condition of women in marriage," thereby "laying the foundation of domestic existence" and thus guaranteeing the basic principles of "social justice" (216, 220). As Victor Luftig points out, "though the problem continually acknowledged in the *Subjection* is the absence of opportunities for women beyond marriage, Mill's images of improved circumstances continually return to the married couple in the individual home" (36). Perhaps it is that unshakable belief in the heterosexual couple that explains Mill's otherwise curious reluctance in *The Subjection* to endorse divorce. On the one hand, Mill seems squarely in favor of remarriage, reasoning that

> if a woman is denied any lot in life but that of being the personal body-servant of a despot, and is dependent for everything upon the chance of finding one who may be disposed to make a favourite of her instead of merely a drudge, it is a very cruel aggravation of her fate that that she should be allowed to try this chance only once. The natural sequel and corollary from this state of things would be, that since her all in life depends upon obtaining a good master, she should be allowed to change again and again until she finds one. (161)

But Mill hastens to add that he is "not saying that she ought to be allowed this privilege." "That," he maintains, "is a totally different consideration. The question of divorce, in the sense involving liberty of remarriage, is one into which it is foreign to my purpose to enter" (161). When he mentions divorce again a few pages later, he suggests it as a remedy only for those yoked to the truly unreasonable:

> there are, no doubt, women, as there are men, whom equality of consideration will not satisfy; with whom there is no peace while any will or wish is regarded but their own. Such persons are a proper subject for the law of divorce. They are only fit to live alone, and no human beings ought to be compelled to associate their lives with them. (172)[1]

Finally, in his last mention of divorce, at the end of the same chapter, he makes it clear that he is talking only about a "separation on just terms." "I do not now speak of a divorce," he insists (179).

Mill's reluctance to address the question of divorce seems strange, not only because divorce seems to have everything to do with his concerns in *The Subjection*, but also because divorce was now possible, having been made legal (although not affordable, and not equally available to men and women) in England 12 years before the publication of *The Subjection*, in 1857. In a letter to John Nichol after the publication of *The Subjection*, he explained that he steered away from the question of divorce in the essay not only for political reasons ("from the obvious inexpediency of establishing a connection in people's minds between the equality and any particular opinions on the divorce question"), but also because "I do not think that the conditions of the dissolubility of marriage can be properly determined until women have an equal voice in determining them, nor until there has been experience of the marriage relation as it would exist between equals" (qtd in Rossi 60). Mill's reluctance to take up the issue until marriage has been reformed indicates his basic belief in the institution and his hope that once the conditions between men and women are made more equitable, marriage will improve to such a degree that divorce will not be necessary. And indeed, for all of its strenuous critique of marriage as it was actually practiced by the Victorians, *The Subjection* envisions a future in which the union involves no "obligation of obedience" and is "no longer enforced to the oppression of those to whom it is purely a mischief" (Rossi 179). As Sue Lonoff reminds us, Mill concludes *The Subjection* "with a forecast of the happiness to be gained by both sexes when women become men's equals," when what Susan Hardy Aiken calls the "paradisial state" of "this new form of relationship" has been realized (Lonoff 81, Aiken 365). Perhaps we are to assume that no one would want to leave such a paradise, and so the question of divorce would then be moot. "Like the sacred marriage at the climax of Revelation," Aiken argues, "the marriage Mill envisions is the goal of historical evolution, the sign of a transformed civilization" (366). And to take up, even to entertain, the idea of breaking the contract that signals such an advanced state of society would be to blight the vision at the heart of Mill's essay.

What are we to make of the fact that one of the most powerful and celebrated documents in the crusade for women's rights has as its ultimate goal the improvement of the institution of marriage, even the establishment of a domestic paradise? Why did Mill, the liberal thinker *par excellence*, the theorist who, in *On Liberty*, derided those social strictures that limit the variety of experiences open to persons, maintain such a deeply normative vision? Conversely, what does it mean that Queen Victoria, the monarch Margaret Homans and Adrienne Munich describe as "so matrimonially devoted, so excessively maternal (nine children), and then so emphatically widowed," wrote to her newly-married daughter on more than one occasion about marriage's discontents (2)?

One thing these curiously contradictory cultural facts suggest is that marriage is a vexing institution, one that keeps the politics of mid-Victorians confused,

constantly under revision, and divided in their aims. While Mill explicitly and powerfully uncovered the monstrosity of the institution in terms of both its legal implications and the actual horrors to which the doctrine of coverture and the patriarchal nature of nineteenth-century culture gave rise, he dedicated his protofeminist essay to proposing ways in which the institution could be improved. Similarly, while the Queen was clearly aware of the evils the relationship entailed for women, she publicly celebrated her own marriage, extolling "the mutual love and perfect confidence which bound the Queen and Prince to each other" (qtd in Houston 174). Further, she valorized her status as wife over her status as queen in a very public manifestation of the doctrine of separate spheres, endorsing the ideal of the Angel in the House and of woman's limited and private domestic role. And finally, in her pronounced mourning for Albert, she enacted the myth of the modest heroine, who only loves once and loves forever—a strange pose for the woman who professed to "hate marriages" (Hibbert, *Queen Victoria in Her Letters and Journals* 287).

Perhaps it goes without saying that marriage is a vexed and vexing institution. At this particular moment in twenty-first-century culture, when it is a truism that the divorce rate is 50 percent but reality television celebrates the courtship plot in its innumerable versions of *The Bachelor*, perhaps we should not be surprised to notice the paradoxical nature of the Victorians' attitude to matrimony.[2] Indeed, this was an age that saw the rise of a powerful women's movement, the passage of numerous laws respecting the rights of women (from the first Custody of Infants Act in 1839 to the first law protecting women against matrimonial cruelty in 1878), and the phenomenon of the New Woman, but also a century that gave us Coventry Patmore and his domestic angel, Ruskin and his queen confined to her domestic garden, and Sarah Stickney Ellis's conservative prescriptions for the women of England.

Accept, even assume, that the rhetoric surrounding marriage will be confused and confusing, then. Accept that such rhetoric will be full of self-censure, contradictory in its aims, constituted by tensions between public image and private admissions, and of norms that remain the norm even as they are hard to swallow. But why, then, given that such confusions, hesitations, and contradictions characterize marriage in the Victorian period, has the courtship plot remained the defining model for studies of the novel? Why does our most basic understanding of the plot of the domestic novel suggest that we have overlooked the crisis of marriage the Queen's letters, Mill's essay, and the furor over the Woman Question so clearly point to?[3] We need to appraise the relation between marital discontents and the courtship plot, and in this era of interdisciplinary studies, critical legal studies, and new historicism, we have many models for such a study. Indeed, twentieth- and twenty-first-century critics of Victorian literature and culture have focused on married women's property, on prostitution, on the New Woman, and on the questions of women and work and women and education and their relationship to the Victorian novel, although in so doing they tend to subscribe to the basic tenet of Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* that "the great majority of novels written

since *Pamela* have continued its basic pattern, and concentrated their main interest upon a courtship leading to marriage" (148–9). Such allegiance to the courtship plot suggests that even in uncovering a more historically specific and skeptical understanding of gender and culture in the nineteenth century, we still accept the notion that marriage provides closure for the domestic novel.[4] Our commitment to the courtship plot also leads us to overlook important parallels such as the fact that divorce was legalized in the same year that *Little Dorrit* (a novel that includes a breach of promise suit, an extralegal separation, and a marriage described as a "jolt through a Slough of Despond, and through a long, long avenue of wrack and ruin) concluded (in 1857) or that the divorce bill was debated in parliament as Thackeray was writing *The Newcomes* (a novel that stingingly critiques arranged marriages, includes a spectacular divorce case, and leaves the reader to imagine, if she can, that its hero and heroine eventually unite in "Fable-land") from 1853 through 1855 (*Little Dorrit* 668, *The Newcomes* 818).

Important work has been done on the mutual relationship between the Woman Question and the Victorian novel and on the mutual relationship between the Woman Question and the development of laws protecting wives, their property, and their children; I want now to apply that work to our basic understanding of the nineteenth-century novel and its prevalent plots, an application that seems especially important given that the novel anticipated much of the legislation that gave women rights to their children, their property, and their bodies, and given that the novel, in portraying the dissolution of marriage before it was, strictly speaking, legal, provided the law with plots by which it might sever the matrimonial bond. While critics do acknowledge that novels treat marital failure (essays on Trollope's *He Knew He Was Right* [1869] or Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* [1848], to name two of the most popular examples), the multitude of novels that plot the failure of marriage—before and after divorce was legalized, long before the advent of the sensation novel or the daring plots of Thomas Hardy and George Meredith—suggest that the novel is just as often (often at the same time as it plots a courtship and ends with a wedding) dedicated to showing how a marriage unravels, to uncovering the myth of matrimonial bliss, to revealing how many husbands and wives were trying to escape or miserably enduring the wedlock they had so eagerly sought, as it is to plotting courtship. Or to put it another way, we recognize that novels plot marital failure, but we have yet to revise our understanding of the genre with those plots in mind. One way to think about both the prevalence of this plot and the fact that it has not been accounted for in our theories of the novel might be to posit that the novel's predilection for the failed-marriage plot is "a corollary of the importance of marriage to the novel form" and that it in fact "reinforces the romance plot."[5]

Indeed, it sometimes seems as if marriage is everywhere written against, even as it is everywhere desired or assumed. Thus one reason we do not see the nineteenth-century debates over marriage reflected in later criticism of the Victorian novel is that even those Victorians who exposed the problems of the institution believed in it in a very fundamental way and insisted that it was

crucial, for individuals and for society. While Mill admitted that it was "next to an impossibility to form a really well-assorted union" and suggested that marriage makes men monsters, he did not want to consider divorce in his proposals for the reform of marriage, and he believed women wanted to remain in the home, in the domestic sphere—that they wanted, in other words, to remain wives (233). By the same token, even though the Queen believed marriage to be "sad and painful," when she herself was released from the "ailing, aching state" of marriage, she engaged in a bout of spectacular and spectacularly long mourning and dedicated herself to memorializing her husband ((Hibbert, *Queen Victoria in Her Letters and Journals* 233, 105).

In a somewhat similar fashion, the work by historians on marital failure in the Victorian period has helped us understand how and why the failure of marriage became a public, juridical matter in the nineteenth century, while literary critics have made important connections between the legalization of divorce and its dissemination in the public press and the enormous popularity of the sensation novel, with its reliance on bigamy and adultery as pivots of the plot. But there exists a marked reluctance to consider the ramifications of the public failure of marriage on our understanding of the courtship plot (and especially on our understanding of the novels written before, say, the 1860s), just as, I think, we are reluctant to entertain the notion that the examples of failed marriage we do admit are so numerous as to suggest they are representative, rather than remarkable. For instance, one of the most astute critics of Victorian gender politics, Mary Lyndon Shanley, argues that "Mill's depiction of marriage departed radically from the majority of Victorian portrayals of home and hearth," citing Ruskin's "Of Queens' Gardens," Coventry Patmore's *The Angel in the House*, and James Fitzjames Stephen's vehement assertion that he disagreed with *The Subjection* "from the first sentence to the last" ("Marital Slavery" 233). But, in fact, Mill's argument dovetails quite closely, as we have seen, with Queen Victoria's private assessment of the institution, and it also resonates with the portraits of unhappy marriages that frequently shape Browning's poems ("My Last Duchess," "Andrea del Sarto"), with George Meredith's sonnet sequence devoted to the failure of marriage, *Modern Love*, and with Frances Power Cobbe's diatribes against matrimonial cruelty and the doctrine of coverture more generally in her essays "Celibacy v. Marriage," "Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors," and "Wife-Torture in England," not to mention the sensation novel's fascination with bigamy and adultery.

This book, then, reads the Victorian novel with the vexed nature of marriage firmly in mind. It seeks to build on recent feminist and New Historicist criticism of the domestic novel by inserting the marriage debate into novel theory. Specifically, *Dickens and the Rise of Divorce* argues that marital failure appears so often in the novel that it constitutes a plot in and of itself. The failed-marriage plot—the story of a marriage that disintegrates into mutual alienation or dissolves in separation or divorce—complements and competes with the courtship plot and enables the novelist to write beyond the third volume, as Thackeray puts it in *The Newcomes*.[6]

The history of the English novel is incomplete without the failed-marriage plot, for this narrative is the necessary, if often ignored, second half of the story of courtship the domestic novel is so eager to tell. In Chapter 1, I contextualize this plot by interrogating those theories of the novel that leave little room for the discontents of marriage, by revisiting a series of novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth century in order to uncover those failed-marriage plots we have been trained to overlook, and by tracing the legal history of marriage and divorce that makes available alternatives to the courtship plot.

As the title of this book suggests in its echo of Watt, one of my main purposes in *Dickens and the Rise of Divorce* is to analyze—and break—the lock Watt's thesis has had on our understanding of the novel for over 50 years. As the title also suggests, I do so in large part by concentrating on the novels of Charles Dickens. The novels of Dickens are, perhaps unexpectedly, fertile ground for a case study of the failed-marriage plot: their conservative, domestic plots notwithstanding, in each and every one there exists at least one failed marriage and at least one plot which revolves around breaking wedlock. The disintegration of a marriage is, in fact, one of the things that Dickens makes fictions from, and he gives the failure of marriage a surprisingly high degree of visibility. All of Dickens's novels are concerned—in a multiplicity of ways, both large and small, and in a manner that is alternately comic, tragic, melodramatic, and ironic—with the phenomenon of failed marriage. As I discuss at length at the end of Chapter 1, Dickens cannot quit bringing up the matter of failed marriages. In Chapters 2–5, I examine some of those instances in which he presents the breaking of the matrimonial bond with extraordinary clarity, as well as those moments of marital dis-ease in his novels which we may have read over, ignored, or dismissed in our concentration on the courtship plot. Moving from an exploration of the way Dickens utilizes the failed-marriage plot in three early novels—*Oliver Twist* (1837–39), *Nicholas Nickleby* (1838–39), and *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–41)—to three novels written in the middle, and perhaps at the height, of Dickens's career—*Dombey and Son* (1846–48), *David Copperfield* (1849–50), and *Hard Times* (1854)—I read the novels of Dickens in dialogue with parliamentary debates and the articles they appeared alongside in *Household Words*; I analyze his fictions in the context of popular entertainment like Punch and Judy shows and Madame Tussaud's waxworks exhibitions; and I set his fictions alongside the conduct books of Sarah Stickney Ellis, the novels and essays of Caroline Norton, and the journalism of Eliza Lynn Linton. In my chapters on Dickens at mid-career I am especially interested in Victorian protofeminists like Norton and Linton, whose work in reforming the laws of child custody, divorce, and married women's property stands in a curious and contradictory relation to the apparently conservative plots and politics of their own novels and essays—plots and politics which seem to have much in common with those we find in Dickens. This apparent inconsistency suggests not only the need for a more nuanced account of the Woman Question, but also a reassessment of Dickens's own gender politics.

I concentrate on the novels of Dickens, then, as a case study of the failed-marriage plot, a means of uncovering a very different Dickens than we have previously admitted, and an attempt to develop a more accurate picture of what we think of, anachronistically, as Victorian feminism. In the failed-marriage plot, we see Dickens's relation to the Woman Question—its defining issues, its leading intellectuals, its strategies of persuasion, its narrative techniques—come to the fore. Encompassing the issues of child custody, property rights, matrimonial cruelty, and the law of separation and divorce, the Woman Question is important to consider in the context of this study for two reasons. First, the failed-marriage plot is a woman's plot—a plot that concerns itself primarily with the matter of female agency: it tends to revolve around a wife leaving her husband, an act that was both illegal and unacceptable. Furthermore, the ambiguity with which the Victorian monarchy and the legislature dealt with matters of sexual politics, the contending images of the domestic, and the contradictory policies concerning the family which were at work during the nineteenth century make this a period of particular richness for my project. Further, while I find the failed-marriage plot a suggestive and productive one whenever it appears—whether in *Mansfield Park* (1814) or *Wuthering Heights* (1847) or *Jude the Obscure* (1895)—the plot is of special significance when it appears at the same time as the first stirrings of an active woman's movement. In other words, the cultural context of the Victorian novel enables us to see quite clearly the kinds of social and legal forces to which the failed-marriage plot was responding, as well as the kinds of institutional changes that followed in its wake.

The failed-marriage plot works against the energies of the traditional courtship plot and points to the nature of the problems that bring about the failure of marriage, both in individual instances and as a social institution. Both plots are necessary, and both plots read each other (often within the same novel) and contribute to our notions of marriage, as well as to our sense of the patriarchy. Yet the failed-marriage plot allows us to see that there is a possibility for change, that there is a weakness in the hegemonic force, that there is a way in which a wife can break free from what *Dombey and Son*'s Captain Cuttle calls "the house of bondage" (794). Although the women who manage to escape their failed marriages tend to wind up in other patriarchal institutions—Edith Dombey with her doddering Cousin Feenix in Italy, Louisa Bounderby back home with her father—it is still important to note that they have done much more than simply trade one form of imprisonment for another. The fact that their return to a father-figure is of their own choosing is crucial, and it points to both the victory and the limitations of these narratives of disrupted matrimony. The failed-marriage plot, then, simultaneously points to the power of a society to dictate behavior and to the ever-present possibility of flying in the face of those dictates. Raymond Williams reminds us that the hegemonic force "does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified. It is also continually resisted, limited, altered, challenged by pressures not at all its own" (*Marxism and Literature* 112).

In showing us the possibility of such resistance, the novel of failed marriage suggests the possibility of alteration and modification.

D.A. Miller suggests that "perhaps no openly fictional form has ever sought to 'make a difference' in the world more than the Victorian novel, whose cultural hegemony and diffusion well qualified it to become the primary spiritual exercise of an entire age" (*The Novel and the Police* x). The Victorian novel is, then, a felicitous point at which to study the failed-marriage plot since in it we can see the paradox of what has been called Victorian hypocrisy. Just as strenuously as marriage was presented as the goal of every British girl and the cornerstone of British society, the social and individual conflicts that were supposed to be set to rest by marriage are often, in the Victorian novel, highlighted by the failed marriages they chronicle. As Judith Walkowitz points out, "marriage no longer resolved the female dilemma; it compounded it" (13). If we would take seriously those stories of marriage the novel so often tells, if we would direct our attention away from the courtship plot, we would see that this is so; we would begin to notice all the husbands and wives clamoring for our attention, all their stories of marriage and its discontents, all the warnings their plots give, and the ramifications of their plots for the genre. In other words, if we concentrate on the stories of marriage as much as we have attended to the stories of courtship, we would begin to put together a rather different history of the novel, a more nuanced sense of the genre, and a more precise understanding of the culture that produced that object, that told such distressing stories and so often sounded the alarm over the institution. It was the Victorians who brought us both the popularization of the novel form and the legalization of divorce; the chapters that follow suggest that coincidence is no accident.

Notes

1 It must be admitted, however, that those "with whom there is no peace while any will or wish is regarded but their own" is a pretty capacious category. Certainly there are more people who fit that description than there are women who have committed adultery or men who have committed adultery aggravated by incest, bigamy, rape, sodomy, bestiality, cruelty, or desertion, to compare Mill's grounds for divorce with the legal standard in 1869.

2 In the *New York Times* on April 19, 2005, Dan Hurley debunked the myth that "one in two American marriages end in divorce." Hurley found that "the rate has never exceeded about 41 percent" and that rates vary so much by age, gender, and level of education, that it is difficult to calculate an overall rate. He also found some sociologists skeptical about this apparently lower rate of divorce. "About half is still a very sensible statement," according to Dr Larry Bumpass, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin's Center for Demography and Ecology. Bumpass's insistence on the 50 percent rate bears out my larger point: that we believe in marriage and seek it like the grail, even as we assume that it will fail at least half of the time.

3 I am not suggesting that Victorianists have overlooked the crisis of marriage, but rather that we have not considered the ramifications of that crisis for the novel as a genre. While work on coverture, divorce law, matrimonial cruelty, and married women's property law (the work of Mary Poovey, Lee Holcombe, and Mary Lyndon Shanley deserves special mention in this context) has caused us to reexamine our notions about Victorian gender politics, they have yet to influence our understanding of the novel. By the same token, historians have long been concerned with the intersection between marriage law and the Woman Question, and studies by James Hammerton, Maeve Doggett, John Gillis, Roderick Phillips, and Allen Horstman are not only careful and perceptive analyses of the way in which the institution of marriage became increasingly codified and policed, moving from a private sacrament to a civil matter made very public, but they are also highly suggestive for any student of the novel. In other words, these studies have considered the history of divorce and its cultural and ideological consequences, but literary critics have yet to examine the significance of marital failure in terms of the novel's emphasis and dependence on the courtship plot.

4 Recent studies of matrimonial cruelty by Marlene Tromp, Lisa Surridge, and Kate Lawson and Lynn Shakinovsky draw much-needed attention to one specific kind of marital failure and what the representation of domestic violence in the novel reveals about marital cruelty in Victorian culture, just as work devoted to the sensation novel, with its reliance on plots of adultery and bigamy, often suggests the degree to which Victorians were chafing at their matrimonial bonds. While work like this, inaugurated by Elaine Showalter's analysis of the novels of Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Ellen Wood in the 1970s, poses the important question as to whether the wedding that shores up the social system inevitably leads to a happy union, that questioning has led to a more informed understanding of Victorian marriage itself rather than a reconsideration of the genre that so often devotes itself to a sustained portrait of domestic life.Similarly, Andrew Dowling's seminal essay, "'The Other Side of Silence': Matrimonial Conflict and the Divorce Court in George Eliot's Fiction," explores what the new divorce law reveals about Victorian assumptions about privacy, marital felicity, and the more nuanced meaning of cruelty operative in the cultural and juridical ideology of the second half of the century. But while he argues that the divorce court's proceedings "fueled an interest and created an audience for tales of matrimonial breakdown," his cause-and-effect logic precludes any exploration of the ramifications of this popular plot for our allegiance to the courtship plot (328).

5 I am indebted to James Eli Adams for this insight.

6 As Mrs Mackenzie tells the narrator of *The Newcomes*, "You gentlemen who write books, Mr Pendennis, and stop at the third volume, know very well that the real story often begins afterwards. My third volume ended when I was sixteen, and was married to my poor husband. Do you think all our adventures ended then, and that we lived happy ever after?" (230).