Marriage in the nineteenth-century is critically central, symbolically and structurally, to the way the British novel emerges as a genre. How do you even begin replotting a deeply cultural, social event like marriage? Jill Galvan and Elsie Michie offer a provocative compilation of essays that explores what it means to rethink the British "marriage plot," which they describe as "the phrase [that] has come to ground our sense of the long nineteenth century" (1). The editors and their contributors aim to "widen our sense of how the period's fictions contemplated and aestheticized conjugal coupling and thus to diversity the repertoire of critical questions we bring to its representation" (2). These essays challenge the way we see nineteenth-century marriage, presenting it as a social, anthropological event that reshapes fiction as well as the conversations surrounding nationhood, modernity, and education.

To explain the rationale for the collection, Mary Jean Corbett notes that in To the Lighthouse, Virginia Woolf treats marriage as both a literal and a symbolic formation -- a social arrangement that exists for itself and also stands in for something else. As Corbett says, "both Lily and the narrative voice thus acknowledge the cultural work that marriage has done, and continues to do, as a site at which the 'simple, obvious, commonplace' stuff of ordinary life becomes a vehicle for multiple meanings in different historical moments" (237). These multivalent meanings prompt a series of scholarly explorations in which critiques of marriage as primarily a "discursive condition" (3) stretch beyond ideas of virtue, desire, and sexuality. The marriage plot becomes a conduit for how to read nineteenth-century fictional narratives.

Ian Duncan leads the conversation with his inquiry into the Bildungsroman as well as the historical novel and how each touches national themes. Considering "the structural antagonism between Bildung and the marriage plot" (17) in Germaine de Stael's Corinne, or Italy (1807), Duncan explains how the "new kind of protagonist" that appears in the Bildungsroman and the historical novel accompanies "a new, developmental conception of novelistic form," one which "redeem[s] the aesthetic scandal of the novel's formlessness" (20).

The idea of formlessness permeates the ways in which contributors to this collection reconceptualize the marriage plot. To illustrate what she calls "the long afterlives of nineteenth-century fictional genres" (101), Lauren Goodlad links George Eliot's Felix Holt, the Radical (1865) to two Danish television series, Borgen and Forbrydelsen; for her, all three pieces exemplify political Bildungsroman, "a hybrid genre."

Pursuing the theme of formlessness, Duncan reminds us that Schlegel "exalts the novel less as a form than as a force" and stresses the "tension between infinite process and formal containment as the structuring energy of the literary" (24). As a genre, Duncan writes, the novel is deeply humanizing because intrinsically it is "always in formation, surging toward an unrealized future; it is the genre of infinity, not totality" (24). This infinitude frees up the space necessary to continually debate what the nineteenth-century novel's marriage plot signifies, recognizing its social, political, and cultural malleability.

Likewise preoccupied with the openness of the novel form, Elisha Cohn observes that it was "elastic enough to reconfigure or eliminate the conventional narrative event in the face of incremental, gradual change" (37). Setting the marriage plot beside Darwin's The Descent of Man (1871), Cohn asks what happens to a narrative when it highlights the element of choice. Reading novels by Mona Caird and Olive Schreiner through this Darwinian lens, Cohn finds that "choice itself appears an idealized concept for both men and women; it is often invoked but rarely demonstrated" (54). In nineteenth-century fiction, choice often appears as an unrealized future, yet it is the genre of infinity, not totality" (24). This infinitude frees up the space necessary to continually debate what the nineteenth-century novel's marriage plot signifies, recognizing its social, political, and cultural malleability.

Actual wives in Victorian England sometimes made murderous choices. In some cases of marital strife, as Marlene Tromp shows, the wife exacted "retaliatory violence" (127), making a deliberate, deadly choice because she had chosen badly before or had had no choice at all within a marriage. The social politics of marriage, Tromp explains, strongly influenced the judicial treatment of murderous women. Even if found guilty of murder, a wife who was still fulfilling her wifely duties and retaining her expected "feminine nature" would receive a much lighter sentence than a woman who was guilty of somehow casting off her role of wife, mother, and domestic caregiver. More precisely, Tromp shows, a woman found guilty of murder could lighten her sentence by "re-feminiz[ing]" herself through confession. "[T]he ritual of confession ...," Tromp writes, "became a way to restore the socially propriouz femininity of a woman who engaged in one of the most
detructive, antipatriarchal acts: matricide. Just as critically, it reinforced the power of the listening culture at large to define gendered norms” (128).

Tromp cites four highly publicized cases that took place between the 1840s and 1860s, during which time the first domestic violence laws were passed. When Sarah Westwood poisoned her husband of twenty years, Tromp observes, it was thought, she directly assaulted domesticity itself, fostering such an intense anxiety about the sale and use of arsenic that Parliament eventually passed the Arsenic Act of 1851. Furthermore, Tromp writes, Westwood showed no remorse for her actions. “[H]er refusal to supply the normalizing comfort that would have come with her confession seemed to enrage the public, who wholly accepted her guilt,” and she was executed with no newspaper’s lamentation (133).

Another case of poisoning, however, touched the public quite differently. In poisoning her husband to escape the slavery of a marriage made against her will, the young and beautiful Catherine Foster complicated the status of the murderous wife. Even so, since she was cunning enough to deceive and murder, she “could not so easily be marked as a failure of femininity” (135). Though eventually executed, she drew both public and judicial lament. Also, her confession and apology before her death repositioned her in a state of “proper womanhood” (136) and through this she “restored moral order, marriage, and gender relations” (138).

Cases such as these show how public opinion in Victorian England worked to mold the social institution of marriage and the cultural norms surrounding it. Nevertheless, Tromp writes, “the threat murderous wives proposed was not just to husbands but to fairness and the order of family and to faith in a culture’s narrative of marriage” (144; my emphasis). This point reinforces the discursive nature of the marriage plot and its role in public conversation.

Drawing on the anthropology of myth, Kathy Psomiades demonstrates how “marriage is central to the nineteenth-century novel, both as subject matter and as structure” (55). According to Psomiades, we must see the realist plot of the nineteenth-century novel beside its more romantic, mythological predecessor. Rather than taking the former as a replacement of the latter, however, we must see both as representations, and realize that fictional representation “also has a history” (75). “Romance,” writes Psomiades, “becomes a form of mediation between an archaic realm of ‘mythic’ meaning, based in human experience of natural phenomena, and a realist world of contemporary individuals and social structures” (59). Through novel reading, then, we may continue to see how much the marriage plot—the fictional representation of marriage—is socially and culturally determined.

Kelly Hager studies the link between marriage and education by juxtaposing Tennyson’s school story, The Princess (1847), with L.T. Meade’s A Sweet Girl Graduate (1891). Both narratives, we are told, conjoin the marriage plot with the curricular/career plot. Rather than seeing Tennyson’s poem as singularly “protofeminist or conservative,” then, Hager shows how much it intervenes in the overall debate circling marriage and education. The poem was used, Hager writes, “in the founding and shaping of schools, and its performance history in schools in the second half of the century provide crucial contexts for the role it plays in Meade’s novel” (87). Meade’s strong female character, Priscilla, attends school to prepare herself for the "battle of life," but other young women in his story attend for other reasons, notably to prepare for the role of wife and mother.

When the schoolgirls perform Tennyson’s work as a play in Meade’s novel, most of them recite the courtship lines, omitting the verses on female education. While the education plot and the marriage plot here seem to meet, Hager argues that ultimately The Princess and A Sweet Girl Graduate are both school stories, with the marriage plot suggested, but elided. Though one of the schoolgirls in A Sweet Girl Graduate marries by the novel’s end, Meade’s final paragraphs highlight Priscilla, who is still in college. Similarly, Tennyson’s poem ends with Ida still weighing the Prince’s proposal. For Hager, then, the relationship between marriage and education “is not a binary” (98), and perhaps “it is most accurate to say that marriage has everything to do with education for women [...] marriage was not an option for all women; it offered education not in opposition but as an alternative to marriage” (99).

This view of female education constitutes another step towards modernity, which Sukanya Banerjee links to the transimperial by focusing on sensation novels from the 1860s. The bigamy plot featured in many of these novels raises questions about the nature and perception of conjugal loyalty in the mid-Victorian era. According to Banerjee, loyalty “performs...a novel function” in this period, and it is important to see how “concepts of faithfulness, obedience, and constancy […] remained indispensable in cementing the social and political configurations of the nineteenth century […] in ways that attempted to coalesce a viable ‘modern’ idiom of loyalty” (146). Not coincidentally, these novels gain popularity around the same time as the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857, which finally enabled individuals to file for legal divorce, essentially catalyzing English society into a more modern era. To show that nineteenth-century India was likewise anxious about marriage reform, Banerjee cites the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act.

The longevity of reimagined plots stemming from the nineteenth-century novel is increasingly apparent in the essays that build on Dickensian serialization and the textual gaps that promote new methods of historical representation. Though many of the narratives examined in these essays involve heterosexual relations, the collection finally turns to queer readings of Dickens’s fiction. Probing Dickensian fan fiction, Holly Furneaux shows how readers have extended, transformed, and experimented with the different relationships between his characters. The infamous “closing dash” that marks the end of Bleak House, she writes, seemingly “offers an invitation to choose your own adventure, to fashion Esther’s thoughts, ‘even supposing…,’ to reader requirements” (171). This readerly freedom has gained ample traction in the form of online fan fiction, which takes the novel form and remolds it in such a way that there is no neat sense of narrative closure. “[T]he content, form, and mode of publication of Dickens’ work,” Furneaux argues, “offer incitements to creative extension and fan authors work collaboratively with Dickens in their development of queer plotlines that depart from the marital closure closely associated with the Victorian novel” (173). This notion of working with Dickens I find most intriguing. Fan authors write as well as read, generating ongoing narratives. Rather than competing with each other, these various narratives may coexist in a practice of “continual reading” (175). The gaps created by serialization itself encourage this type of readerly response.

Turning from fan fiction back to Dickens’s own work, Talia Shaffer shows how “Communities of Care in Our Mutual Friend” move “Beyond Coupling.” According to Shaffer, “caring friendship” becomes the “real basis of marriage” in this novel as characters like Eugene Wrayburn and Lizzie Hexam receive a fundamental “affective re-education” that re-contours both the marriage plot and our experience of it (192). Persuasively arguing that “we [the readers] too get retrained” (192) by a sense of sympathy rooted in responsive care, Shaffer contends that Dickens’s narrative treats marriage as a way of “consolidating community” (196). Though the care communities that Schaffer finds in Our Mutual Friend often entail the
disability of someone who needs active, one-way care, they also include relations of mutual care, which revise the marriage plot. "Marriages based primarily on mutual care, not desire," writes Shaffer, "can accommodate nontraditional unions" (203).

These communities, though, sometimes include singular characters such as Tremlow, the "extra man" in Our Mutual Friend. Writing of this character who never marries yet attends lavish dinner parties flanked by couples, Helena Michie notes that "his singleness defines others as encoupled," and he becomes a fixture that cannot be considered as disposable for the social event (228). Since he becomes a conduit for other people's plots, his presence prompts us to think about the marriage plot and how Dickens has both challenged it and extended its force.

While exhibiting many different perspectives on the marriage plot in the nineteenth-century novel as well as in Victorian life, this collection as a whole achieves what it promises: a mode of questioning how representation of history through fictional accounts can come to shape our knowledge and awareness of something as culturally and socially determined as marriage. Whether marriage is linked to myth, education, nationalism, transimperialism, queer relations, or communities of care, the marriage plot is deeply discursive. Given the various ways in which we absorb and interpret the marriage plot, its discursiveness gives it many afterlives.

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