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Review of *The Marriage of Minds: Reading Sympathy in the Victorian Marriage Plot & Victorian Fiction and the Insights of Sympathy: An Alternative to the Hermeneutics of Suspicion*

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Rachel Ablow, *The Marriage of Minds: Reading Sympathy in the Victorian Marriage Plot* (Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 231.

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Brigid Lowe, *Victorian Fiction and the Insights of Sympathy: An Alternative to the Hermeneutics of Suspicion* (Anthem Press, 2007), pp. 260.

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These two studies show that the ideological tug-of-war over the Victorian novel is far from over, and that George Eliot stands in the middle of it. Brigid Lowe's *Victorian Fiction and the Insights of Sympathy* is a bold and provocative attack on critics who have trawled nineteenth-century novels for evidence that these works were concerned above all with exercising ideological control. D. A. Miller, Terry Eagleton, Stephen Greenblatt, Catherine Gallagher, Deirdre David and Mary Poovey are all amongst Lowe's targets, and she draws on a wide range of sources to dismantle their conjectures. Rachel Ablow's *The Marriage of Minds* is, in comparison, a more traditional exercise in literary criticism. Repeatedly acknowledging her debt to the very same critics denounced by Lowe, Ablow elegantly traces the evolution of an idea through five canonical novels. Her readings set out to prove how representations of sympathy often concealed strategies to control female identity – precisely the sort of claim that Lowe sets out to undermine.

In *The Marriage of Minds*, Rachel Ablow seeks to unpick the Victorian notion that

novel reading constitutes a way to achieve the psychic, ethical, and affective benefits also commonly associated with sympathy in married life: like a good wife in relation to her husband, novelist and critics claimed, novels could 'influence' readers and so help them resist the depraved values of the marketplace. (1)

The introduction usefully reminds readers that the modern interpretation of 'sympathy', implying the ability to enter into another's feelings, was not necessarily that of Victorians, who often used the word to mean 'conformity of feelings' (8). This interpretation has great similarities with contemporary descriptions of the legal doctrine of coverture. What follows is an intriguing but unequal discussion of how ideas on sympathy in marriage and sympathy in the fictional genre are bound together in *David Copperfield*, *Wuthering Heights*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *The Woman in White* and *He Knew He Was Right*.

Ablow is sceptical about the benefits of sympathy for the receiver. Sympathy in Dickens and Collins is presented as a hollow concept that serves to secure women as helpmeets for their ambitious husbands. *David Copperfield* relies on Agnes Wickfield to reflect his own accession to maturity, and Walter Hartright is painted as a dubious figure whose acquisition to fortune depends on his control of Laura Fairlie's identity. The parallels Ablow establishes between marital bonds and the relations between reader and novelist are successful in places (Dickens casts the novel as 'something like the reader's wife, influencing him to be ever-better than he was before' (97), and less so in others (the notion that *The Woman in White* perceives the novel 'as the novelist's wife' (97) feels unhelpful). The more compelling chapters are those that look

into the novels in which the question of sympathy is given direct scrutiny. Ablow convincingly explores how *Wuthering Heights* represents sympathy as a ‘threat to female identity’ (45) and depicts the dangers of using a wife to mirror the husband’s personal growth. Brontë defies both the idea of a benevolent female influence and of the novel as a vehicle for sympathy through her violent narrative and unreliable narrators. The novels of Anthony Trollope provide an interesting reversal in which it is masculine identity that is threatened by a naïve faith in sympathy. Trollope portrays a world in which women have become too successful in taking over the home, thereby ruining it as a space for the spiritual regeneration of men. His female characters, strong-minded and independent, refuse to act as mirrors or blank slates, and men who cling blindly to the idea of female sympathy, such as Louis Trevelyan in *He Knew He Was Right*, are severely disappointed. Ablow effectively links Trollope’s delineation of the dangers of excessive dependence within marriage with the novelist’s famously practical attitude towards fiction and what Henry James described as his ‘suicidal satisfaction in reminding the reader that the story he was telling was only, after all, a make-believe’. Sympathy emerges throughout the study as an illusion or an instrument of control.

Brigid Lowe gives a very different construction to the Victorian interest in sympathy by endeavouring to validate the ‘gut response’ that ‘fiction does good work through the extension and cultivation of our capacity for sympathy’ (119). The study, ambitious in scope, is sometimes dizzying in its breadth – certain digressions on Barthes and structuralism, for example, add little to the overall argument. It is, however, an impassioned claim for the enduring vitality of Victorian literature. The first section is to a large extent concerned with modern critical responses to Victorian novels. Lowe expresses a valid impatience with the tendency to claim that ‘their most liberating moments are really moments of repression’ (6) and to read between the lines for signs of ‘ideological consolidation’. The notion that Victorian novelists were naïve about ideas of ‘History’ is dismissed through a brisk analysis of Dickens’s reports as the ‘Uncommercial Traveller’ and of *Dombey and Son*.

Lowe’s real subject is women’s fiction, and she truly hits her stride in the second chapter where she takes on the much-debated topic of realism. Here, Lowe vigorously contests the continuing insistence that

deep down, all novels are about general, abstract ideas, and that what looks like incidental details and particulars in narrative are somehow secondary, ancillary functions of general, universal, abstract Significance. (64)

Lowe is not the first to celebrate ‘feminine’ writing in this manner. Her argument that we should resist the urge to interpret the non-abstract, the sensual or the trivial in the light of an overall ‘Significance’ is, nevertheless, well worth making. Elizabeth Sewell’s novels, Brontë’s *Shirley*, Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* and the works of George Eliot furnish examples of moments that display the ‘irreducible, meaningless mess of sensuous and material experience’ (97). The many frogs in *The Mill on the Floss* are invoked as motifs with no ‘secondary meaning’ beyond Eliot’s ‘sensuous affair with the idea of the slippery, spring amphibians’ (94). Lowe’s celebration of the ‘merely fictional’ fails to examine the manner in which such moments might coexist with others that do suggest ‘deeper Significance’ (94), and her choice of images or passages sometimes begs questions (are the opening paragraphs of ‘Mr Gilfil’s Love-Story’

really as ‘confusing’ as she claims? (73)). Yet the analysis energetically renews the defence of the ‘bagginess’ of Victorian fiction. It also offers the potent argument that it is the reader’s acknowledgement of these moments for what they really are that enables the cultivation of a truly ‘sympathetic’ mind that does not reduce the world to pre-determined patterns.

Having defended the importance of ‘inSignificance’ in Victorian fiction, Lowe turns towards the ability of nineteenth-century novels to engage with social and political ideas even whilst maintaining a ‘personal’ focus. It is here that Lowe joins Ablow in explaining Victorian ideas of ‘sympathy’ and relating it to the ideology of separate spheres. Lowe chooses lesser-studied novelists – Sarah Ellis, Dinah Mulock Craik and Charlotte Yonge – to investigate how sympathy and marriage are intertwined. Ellis’s fiction blurs the separation between public and private spheres, and presents family life as a training ground for public life. To make this initiation successful, sympathy between family members must be carefully restrained. Craik depicts competitive public and private worlds in which mutual dependence is also to be limited and draining emotional ties such as those of parents and siblings are best avoided. The equal sympathy between husband and wife supplies the unique source of respite from the tensions of everyday relationships. On the contrary, Yonge desires the proliferation of sympathy. Men are encouraged to become as altruistic as women, and are valued for the qualities they display in the private rather than the public sphere. Lowe eloquently adds to growing claims that these writers reward further scrutiny. Refreshingly, she does not reduce the analysis to a question of empowerment and objectification, but instead constantly draws attention to the astonishing diversity of ideas within the literature of the period.

George Eliot, essential to any sustained exploration of sympathy in the Victorian novel, brings Ablow and Lowe together. Both devote a chapter to *The Mill on the Floss*, not only for the omnipresence of their chosen theme within it but also because of the lack of sympathy that so many critics have expressed towards its ending. In keeping with the rest of her study, Ablow argues that, rather than offering a solution to some of the world’s ills, sympathy in the novel only compounds the problem of selfishness, as it ‘threatens to make the other into merely an extension of the self’ (71). Ablow brings out the importance of ‘absorption’ in the novel: Maggie’s childhood mishaps are caused by moments of absorption, she is absorbed by the works of Thomas à Kempis and the presence of Stephen Guest; the narrator dwells on her own absorption in the past, and the reader is similarly seduced by the narrative. Yet, rather than producing an ability to understand or aid other people, imaginative capacities indicate an ‘irresponsible form of absent-mindedness’ (82). The solution is ‘unbearably painful’ but ‘ethical’: Maggie must compensate for this by accepting ‘the consequence of things that happen when her mind is elsewhere’ (84). Ablow is right to stress as she does the intellectual foundation of Eliot’s writing and the novelist’s willingness to grapple with complex moral issues, and is equally right to insist – albeit reluctantly – that *The Mill on the Floss* ‘is not a straightforwardly conservative text’ (75). Yet Eliot emerges as the joyless figure of so much twentieth-century criticism – as the chapter’s heading, ‘George Eliot’s Art of Pain’, makes grimly clear.

In stark contrast, Lowe contends that Eliot’s concept of sympathy is positive and expansive. Lowe also highlights Eliot’s intellectual credentials, but persuasively brings to the fore the novelist’s belief in a more emotional form of understanding. Here, Eliot is a writer who

'consistently critiques the reduction of concern for human welfare to ... a math problem with people' (221) and *The Mill on the Floss* is a 'powerful plea against the judging, rewarding, and punishing of human beings ... according to an objective, rigid and unforgiving rationale' (21). Eliot paints a harsh world in which the family no longer guarantees a space of mutually supportive affection but instead acts as an exclusive and selfish clan demanding conformity. In the public sphere, relationships are bound by equally rigid notions of hierarchy and competition. The novel challenges the self-sufficiency of its characters and 'the bourgeois individualist idea ... that through rightful exercise of our own powers of self-assertion we will get the place in life we deserve' (208). Within this critique is the idea that sympathy should not be confined to private relationships – whether between parents or couples, married or courting – since the restriction 'victimizes women and alienates men from the truth and joy of human connection' (236). Maggie's controversial final choice is therefore 'not a matter of subordinating human desire to inhuman duty, but of privileging the calmer affections and social longings which are as authentic as sexual duty' (217). This emphasis on a communal narrative creates an interesting counterpoint to the many readings of the novel that foreground individualism. However, the fact that both Ablow and Lowe ignore the artistic flaws of the ending in order to defend it indicates that many of the questions raised by the novel remain unresolved.

Discussions of Victorian sympathy, the separate spheres, and women's literature will be considerably enriched by these very different works. Ablow's study offers a welcome correction of the assumption that sympathy was unqualifiedly beneficial for the object of such attentions. Lowe's work is in the image of the novels that she selects – baggy and evocative. Though many of her claims invite further debate, she contributes an important answer to the question of why we read Victorian novels and in particular why, as Lowe begins by asking, we continue to read George Eliot.

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