

**GODFREY, ESTHER.**

**THE JANUARY-MAY MARRIAGE IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITISH LITERATURE**

(Palgrave Macmillan 2009). i-xii + 256 pages.

Reviewed by Deborah Denenholz Morse.

Esther Godfrey's fine study of the January-May marriage focuses upon Victorian literature, although there are forays into the Romantics. Godfrey is most interested in the "provocative scenarios for theorizing gender and power" (5) that this literary trope offers; she "chose the nineteenth century as the scope of this book because it offers a unique period of gender disruption and anxiety, but the patterns of exchange that its texts reveal can inform our larger understanding of age as a fundamental marker of gender" (13). Challenging Eve Sedgwick and Gayle Rubin, who stress women's passivity in homosocial exchanges, Godfrey emphasizes "the importance of female sexual desire" (7) in the January-May triangulation of older man, younger woman, and younger man. "Especially during January-May marriages," she argues, "where age differences initiate and encourage the erotic triangles, the young wives emerge as vital, active beings who consciously, sometimes forcefully, pursue or resist the affections of men" (7)

Beginning with Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*, Godfrey's first chapter usefully traces a literary genealogy for the January-May marriage in British literature. Moving from Chaucer through Shakespeare and Restoration comedies to the Romantics and Victorians, Godfrey illuminates familiar texts in unexpected ways. Her commentary upon *Othello* and *Desdemona's* tragedy focuses upon age and gender anxiety rather than upon race; Godfrey argues that "the adaptation of the theme for tragedy rather than comedy . . . demonstrates the maturation of literary depictions of the January-May marriage" (22). In the Restoration comedies of Wycherley and Aphra Behn, Godfrey identifies the strategies by which May wives and their young lovers undermine the entrenched sexual and economic privileges of January husbands. The chapter closes with Byron's *Don Juan*, which Godfrey sees as central to the literary history of the January-May marriage: "As a literary sensation, *Don Juan* established the importance of January-May marriages throughout the century, and it offers a starting point for considering the period's fascination with the age and gender nexus" (38). Godfrey provides an entertaining and insightful analysis of Byron's work and life in relation to the age and gender dynamics of the January-May triangulation.

The rest of the book treats the Victorian novel. Chapter 2 traces the evolution of the January-May marriage as incest narrative in Dickens's work. As Godfrey states, "It would be reductive to state that Dickens moves from an early approval of the incest taboo to a later sanction of incest, but his works reveal his increasing awareness of the light incest sheds on gender and power" (60). Thus Godfrey begins with a perceptive examination of the horror of incest in *Nicholas Nickleby* and *The Old Curiosity Shop*. In *Nicholas Nickleby*, Godfrey argues that Dickens affirms the incest taboo when Nicholas marries Madeline Bray despite the machinations of the January figures, her father Walter and the aged, lascivious Arthur Gride. Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop* escapes the leering attentions of Quilp and her pandering grandfather through death. Godfrey then concentrates upon the complexities of the

January-May marriage theme in *Hard Times* and *Little Dorrit*. On *Hard Times*, Godfrey argues that Louisa Grandgrind's incestuous relations with her father (and brother), coupled with her rebellion against her January-May marriage to Josiah Bounderby, not only challenge male power but also "develops the incest theme as a method for transforming 'bad' men into new, improved models of masculinity" (76). *Little Dorrit* exemplifies Godfrey's argument that "Dickens often presents not the murdering of father but the marrying of father as a restorative ideal" (59). Thus the mutually nurturing January-May marriage of Arthur Clennam and Amy Dorrit ultimately displaces Amy's incestuous relation with her childish, wholly dependent father William. Godfrey's analysis of Dickens' novels beautifully complements Kelly Hager's forthcoming *Dickens and Divorce* (Ashgate), which examines failed marriages in Dickens' (and other Victorians') fictions.

Juxtaposing several major Victorian novels with Victorian paintings, Chapter 3 examines representations of the aging male body in an increasingly visual and medicalized culture. As Godfrey states: "Reading age as a component of gender emphasizes the precariousness of power because a body changes over time, and aging thus challenges gender as a stable entity" (91). Her discussions of William Quiller Orchardson's *The First Cloud* (1887), *Mariage de Convenance* (1883) and *Mariage de Convenance—After!* (1886) and Edmund Blair Leighton's *Til Death Do Us Part* (1878) tease out the complex iconographies of those paintings and serve as preface to an intricate reading of the January-May marriage of Dorothea and Casaubon in *Middlemarch* that focuses upon the aesthetics and disabilities of Casaubon's aging body. As Godfrey argues, "The dynamics of heterosexual relations open possibilities for a valid critique of masculinity, and it is the visualization of Casaubon as a lover, not a scholar, that changes his access to power and authority" (103). Godfrey highlights the "sexual tension and gender subversions that erupt within the marriage" (104) and Casaubon's diminished claims to gendered power. The "virile masculinity of Will [Ladislaw] as the Apollo Belvedere" contrasts with the "increasingly pathologized" body of Casaubon. Dorothea "finds power as a young wife and then a widow" (111), Godfrey argues, but she views Dorothea's romantic marriage to the same-aged Will as conforming to ideal gender roles rather than challenging them. Godfrey does not elaborate upon this judgment, but I would like to suggest that Eliot may intend Dorothea's and Will's marriage—marked by an openness to foreign ideas and an intense intimacy—to be more subversive than Godfrey allows.

I think that Godfrey's most original insights perhaps come in Chapter 4, in the January-May marriage as Gothic nightmare, where Godfrey considers age in relation to gender in long readings of *Jude the Obscure* and *Dracula*. In her riveting explication of *Jude*, Godfrey suggests that ". . . the idea of [Sue Bridehead's] marital relations with Phillotson inspires a Gothic horror so terrific it causes a young bride to leap out a window. And although Phillotson is distressed that he has inadvertently caused her panic, he finds he cannot separate her horror from himself" (113). By foregrounding the element of age in *Jude*, Godfrey forces us to think about "sexual relationship between old and young bodies" and the "hostility toward Phillotson's aging body and the privilege it represents" that "results in much of the blame for the marriage being directed toward him" (126). On *Dracula*, Godfrey discusses the novel's concern with "age penetrating youth" (142); she decides that "what Dracula wants to do to young women is awful, but the text nevertheless encourages some degree of commiseration for the aging male body even as it urges its destruction" (141). Focusing upon the January-May marriage of Dracula and

Mina, Godfrey comes to some fascinating conclusions about the Dracula-Mina-Jonathan Harker triangulation and its production of a child who “contains the blood of all three parental bodies, and—through the novel’s sexual history of transfusions and suckings—the blood of other parents who are male and female, young and old as well” (145).

Turning to the economics of the bargain that is struck in the January-May marriage, Chapter 5 centers upon an adept reading of Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret*. Godfrey argues that novels such as Braddon’s “haggle over the value of older husbands in a market that prizes youth and beauty, and they disclose a traffic in men as much as a traffic in women.” While Godfrey concedes that women are often exploited in January-May marriages, she asserts that they are often empowered as well, especially as they inherit money after their husband’s death in a transfer of wealth that will “trump patriarchal authority with genderless, capitalist clout” (174).

The final chapter is almost elegiac. Beginning with a recognition that many middle-class Victorians had trouble reconciling the quest for wealth with Christian precepts, Godfrey focuses upon the masculine January figure who sacrifices his May lover to a younger man. In a perceptive and moving reading of *Bleak House*, she considers John Jarndyce as a lover who—through his sacrifice of Esther Summerson to the younger Allen Woodcourt—is transformed into “a sacrificial ideal” for whom the married Esther experiences “continued desire” (188). A similar sacrifice, Godfrey shows, is made by the January figure of William Whittlestaff in Anthony Trollope’s *An Old Man’s Love*. Whittlestaff cares so much for his beloved May fiancée, Mary Lawrie, that he breaks their engagement so that she can marry her first lover, the virile and prosperous John Gordon.

If I were to make one suggestion for this original book, I might advise Godfrey to give the Brontës’ and Trollope’s canons the scrutiny she offers to Dickens. On the Brontës, I would like to read more not only on Charlotte’s *Jane Eyre*, *The Professor*, and *Villette*, but also on the disastrous January-May marriage of Rosalie Murray to the vicious Sir Thomas Ashby in Anne’s *Agnes Grey*, in which Rosalie can find nothing to compensate for her January lover, who continues to be a philanderer while imprisoning her at the family estate. I would also like to see Godfrey discuss the January-May paradigm in Trollope’s *The Claverings*, in which the young and beautiful Julia Brabazon experiences bitter rather than empowering widowhood following her gothic marriage to the old roué Lord Ongar. In a narrative that deviates from Godfrey’s January-May patterns, Julia loses her young lover Harry Claving and is hated by all of Lord Ongar’s relations as a usurper. However, these suggestions are merely quibbles. I entirely recommend Esther Godfrey’s book and will consult it often.

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