



Naomi Seidman. *The Marriage Plot: Or, How Jews Fell in Love with Love, and with Literature.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016. 368 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8047-9967-6.

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Naomi Seidman's *The Marriage Plot: Or, How Jews Fell in Love with Love, and with Literature*, is every bit as romantic (and pedantic) as the title suggests. Beginning with Pauline Wengeroff's intriguing and understudied memoirs, Seidman plots the seismic shift that seems to occur between 1848 and 1849, embodied in the distinction between Pauline's older sister's transactional, traditional betrothal, and Pauline's own romantic one. Following this trajectory, Seidman convincingly argues throughout the book that Jews—perhaps in contradistinction to their European gentile counterparts—learned to navigate the ebbs and excesses of romantic courtship *from* books, and not the other way around. At the same time, this symbiotic relationship of the reading, writing, and real-life experience of Jewish romance only exacerbated an existing conflict between the secular, modernizing impulses of the Haskalah—a nineteenth-century movement often called the “Jewish Enlightenment”—and the traditional marriage practices of Eastern European Jews.

Yet as familiar as this nineteenth-century dynamic may be, Seidman resists the urge to lay this tug-of-war to rest at the turn of century. Compounding her engagement with “the first flourishing of modern Hebrew and Yiddish literature in nineteenth-century Eastern Europe and the attempts to forge new romantic models of Jewish

romance in these works,” she pushes further towards “the erotic recovery of Jewish tradition in Hebrew and Yiddish modernist texts of the early twentieth century ... and the surprising reemergence of aspects of the traditional Ashkenazic sexual practices in contemporary Jewish American literature” (p. 10). This broadness of scope is ambitious, so Seidman attempts to “narrow the argument” by limiting herself to works that focus on courtship (p. 11). Narrow, however, is not an adjective one readily associates with this book. If *The Marriage Plot* has a significant flaw, it is in the text's rather unwieldy organization. As Seidman moves betwixt and between three different continents, traversing a hundred years' worth of exceptionally volatile Jewish history, readers might just get dizzy. Had she imposed a linear, progressive timeline onto her collection of texts and events, the book would surely be easier to navigate and use as a pedagogical tool.

At the same time, I could easily diagnose this disorderliness as a classic case of form following function. Seidman is particularly invested in the cyclical nature of Jews' attachment to their own romantic and marital traditions. Chapter 2 provides a striking example. In this chapter, Seidman analyzes the rise, fall, and recrudescence of the matchmaker or marriage broker in the cultural conception of Jewish courtship. The *maskilim*—

that is, proponents of the Haskalah movement—saw the marriage broker as an arch-conspirator against romantic love, alongside the unfeeling and outmoded parents, and thus demanded a full-scale rejection of arranged marriage. Seidman deepens this conversation by drawing a compelling contrast between autobiographical texts of the period, which primarily stage a generational conflict in which immature and sensitive boys are the primary victims of the brokerage system, and the Haskalah novel, which adds to the “vertical axis” of generational conflict a “horizontal axis” drawn from both the Jewish and European novelistic tradition in which “young people carry on a courtship and contend with the obstacles that painfully and deliciously delay their union” (p. 77). This may seem to proceed on a relatively familiar path, but then Seidman delivers a twist: “Having argued that modern Jewish literature begins with and emerges from the rejection of arranged marriage,” she writes, “I propose now ... that it *also* begins with the (partial) recovery of the matchmaking system” (p. 82). Not only that, she goes on to explain, the idea of the matchmaker persisted far longer than most of us are used to thinking, becoming an index of the always-unfinished and equivocal modernity that appears even in Jewish writing and film of the twenty-first century (p. 103).

In much the same fashion, chapter 3 explores the surprising endurance of lineage (also called *yihus* or *yichus*) in both the Jewish conception of marriage and actual marriage practices. “Like the matchmaker,” Seidman claims, “pedigree finds a surprising afterlife even in those literary works that champion erotic attraction in the construction of a marriage partnership” (p. 12). While the maskilim understandably ridiculed the *yihus* brief—an often overwrought and disingenuous document purporting to trace ten generations of familial descent—Jewish American writers of the mid-to-late twentieth century found surprising currency in the idea of Jewish genealogies. In perhaps her most compelling example, Seidman

demonstrates the importance of lineage to Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* (1991-92). While *Angels* calls into being a complex genealogical network that “breaks free ... from its association with the imperative of heterosexual reproduction and Jewish continuity,” it also reminds us that such a dramatic shift in meaning does not render the concept obsolete (p. 163).

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 follow similar narrative arcs, drawing out and thickening a uniquely Jewish and determinedly literary perspective on the topics of heterosexual romance as ideology, “romantic time,” gender complementarity, companionate marriage, the nuclearization of the family structure, and the social, religious, and surprisingly erotic dimensions of sexual segregation. Although for some these concepts are well worn, in Seidman’s hands this material becomes dynamic, thanks to her diverse, fascinating body of texts and her dedication to detailing plot. And while Seidman clearly brings a wealth of social history to bear here, *The Marriage Plot* never forgets that it is a book about books.

Although *The Marriage Plot* would clearly hold plenty of interest for those of us in Jewish studies, I would more readily recommend it to scholars of Western gender and sexuality from the mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. In fact, as soon as I finished the book, I did just that. For although Seidman’s discussions of matchmakers and pedigree charts were intriguing, I honestly felt the book was most captivating when it set itself to recovering a Jewish counternarrative to the de- and reconstruction of masculinity, femininity, and queerness in transatlantic modernity. As she reminds us in the book’s powerful conclusion, “After Marriage,” Jewish sexuality was not merely queered from the outside by a hostile, colonialist, anti-Semitic gaze. Rather, the queerness, the alterity, the sublimity of the modern Jewish eros was produced from the inside, by writers who, although they understood themselves as marginal, engaged fervently in the task of widen-

ing, deepening, and thickening their frame. Thus, although Jewish gender norms had for centuries been read as contrary, even anathematic, to Western sexual and marriage practices, Jewish writers ultimately emerged as central figures in the project of erotic modernity.

Are Jews a romantic people? A cursory glance at Jewish literary output over the past century might suggest that they are not. But then again, who is? Romantic love, after enjoying a brief apotheosis in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was once again discarded, overtaken by the trauma of two world wars, by massive geopolitical shifts powered by a wave of decolonization, and the heady thrills of the sexual revolution. If the European novel—emerging out of a Christian tradition of courtly love and responding to a relative expansion in marital autonomy—is what taught shtetl Jews how to love, then the form certainly seems to have outlived and outran this function. Moreover, as I rummage through my mental library of contemporary Jewish American writing, I find far more examples of what I would (fondly) call “neurotica” than anything that resembles a troubadour’s love song. Yet that is precisely Seidman’s point: Jews may have *read* love from the European novel, but they *write* love differently, in a way that continually reasserts and reimagines their own centuries-old romantic traditions. Perhaps, then, the most daring innovation of Naomi Seidman’s *The Marriage Plot: Or, How Jews Fell in Love with Love, and with Literature* is its ardent determination to recuperate romantic love, to demonstrate its centrality to the Jewish literary tradition as we have come to understand it today. This she does in a marvelously detailed and convincing fashion.

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