
**Reviewed by** Naomi Taub

**Published on** H-Judaic (December, 2017)

**Commissioned by** Katja Vehlow (University of South Carolina)

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 com-
pelling 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 novel-
istic 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 fa-
miliar path, but then Seidman delivers a twist:
“Having argued that modern Jewish literature be-
gins with and emerges from the rejection of ar-
ranged 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 matchmak-
er persisted far longer than most of us are used to
thinking, becoming an index of the always-unfin-
ished and equivocal modernity that appears even
in Jewish writing and film of the twenty-first cen-
tury (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 construc-
tion 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 per-
haps her most compelling example, Seidman
demonstrates the importance of lineage to Tony
Kushner’s *Angels in America* (1991-92). While *An-
gels* calls into being a complex genealogical net-
work 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 Jew-
ish and determinedly literary perspective on the
topics of heterosexual romance as ideology, “ro-
mantic time,” gender complementarity, compan-
ionate marriage, the nuclearization of the family
structure, and the social, religious, and surprising-
ly erotic dimensions of sexual segregation. Al-
though 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 matchmak-
ers and pedigree charts were intriguing, I honest-
ly felt the book was most captivating when it set
itself to recovering a Jewish counternarrative to
the de- and reconstruction of masculinity, femi-
ninity, and queerness in transatlantic modernity.
As she reminds us in the book’s powerful conclu-
sion, “After Marriage,” Jewish sexuality was not
merely queered from the outside by a hostile,
colonialist, anti-Semitic gaze. Rather, the queer-
ness, the alterity, the sublimity of the modern Jew-
ish 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.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at [https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic](https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic)