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Family Likeness: Sex, Marriage, and Incest from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf (review)

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Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas, Volume 8, Number 2, June 2010, pp. 412-414 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/pan.0.0184>



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by mutual attraction, but they are kept alien to one another by age, religion, and temperament. Eventually, as Kraft claims, they “cloak themselves in selfishness, defensiveness, rigidity, coldness when faced with the strangeness of one another” (174). If Kraft is right that Elmwood eventually redeems himself by learning to listen to the desires of his daughter Matilda — and, by doing so, responding “most profoundly to the echo of her mother’s voice” (177) — then this suggests an imperfect compromise. Ultimately, it attests powerfully to the inscrutability, rather than the legibility, of desire.

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Mary Jean Corbett, *Family Likeness: Sex, Marriage, and Incest from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2008. 264 pp.

John Sayles’s 1996 movie *Lone Star* begins by uncovering a decades-old murder and ends with an incestuous embrace. The final scene of the film poses our hero — a small-town sheriff who has just solved the murder — with his lover, a high school history teacher who, he has recently learned, is his half-sister. Sitting on the hood of a car, his sister-lover takes his hand as she explains that she can no longer bear children. “That’s what it’s about, right, that incest thing,” she says, reassuring herself that their own relationship will have no biological issue. Staring at the blank screen of an abandoned drive-in theater, she looks into an unimaginable future: “All that other stuff, all that history? To hell with it, right?”

The film’s linked concerns with class, race, family, and history are inflected in a peculiarly American way, making the lawlessness of the border town setting an ideal backdrop for Sayles’s story. Reading Mary Jean Corbett’s *Family Likeness: Sex, Marriage, and Incest from Jane Austen to Virginia Woolf*, however, I was struck by the continuity between Sayles’s film and its novelistic predecessors, the family fictions that constitute at least one important aspect of the history of the novel from the early nineteenth through the early twentieth centuries. As Corbett persuasively demonstrates, the past is no purer, or simpler, or less conflicted about the various demands of kinship than the present, and the novelists most notably associated with the concept of “domestic fiction” were unavoidably alive to the contradictions of kin.

Corbett's book follows from and expands on a number of earlier studies illuminating the relationship between family and fiction, among them works by Ruth Perry, Sharon Marcus, Helena Michie, Leila Silvana May, Marianne Novy, and Karen Chase and Michael Levenson. For the most part, Corbett's work concerns itself with familiar, canonical texts: *Wuthering Heights*, *Mansfield Park*, *Jane Eyre*, *The Mill on the Floss*, and *Wives and Daughters*. But by linking the novels through their shared concerns with making and unmaking family — through marriage, adoption, and friendship — and by expanding her range into the twentieth century with a sensitive rereading of Virginia Woolf's *The Years* alongside *The Pargiters* and fragments of memoir, Corbett complicates our understanding of the tradition of domestic fiction.

The centerpiece of the monograph is a reading of the Marriage with a Deceased Wife's Sister (MDWS) controversy that spans most of Corbett's period. The controversy touches various of her authors in different ways — from Maria Branwell's presence in the Brontë household to the intimacy between Vanessa Stephen and her half-sister's widower, Jack Hills; from the marriage between Jane Austen's brother Charles and his sister-in-law to Leslie Stephen's outrage at his sister-in-law Anny Thackeray's late marriage (and thus her departure from his household). Corbett juxtaposes novels (especially Harriet Martineau's *Deerbrook* and Felicia Skene's *The Inheritance of Evil*) with pamphlets and speeches representing both sides of the controversy, thus locating in the debate a pervasive and unresolved concern with the claims of consanguinity and affinity in the determination of kinship. Domestic fictions about MDWS, or those concerned with cousin-marriage, such as *Mansfield Park*, or adoption, such as *Jane Eyre*, demonstrate (and sometimes simultaneously mask) the fictitious quality of domesticity. These fictional families, in other words, reveal the fictionality of the family itself as “a made thing, a human artifact” (60).

While the work seems to me to turn on this central — and convincing — chapter, Corbett's book also expands our understanding of the domestic novel and the Victorian family. By arguing for a continuity between Charlotte Brontë's juvenilia and *Jane Eyre*, and through her attention to the language of breeding in *The Mill on the Floss*, Corbett demonstrates the racialized logic of family formation, which is, throughout the period, as much about exclusion as it is about inclusion.

Corbett's range of source material (from nineteenth-century anthropology and law to twenty-first-century gender and queer theory) makes this a compelling and convincing read. Nevertheless, I would have liked to see some consideration of *Shirley*, with its marriage of two friends to two brothers, in the Brontë chapter. Likewise, the analysis of *The Mill on the Floss* might have benefited from some consideration of the appeal of the “stranger,” Stephen Guest, in its analysis of breeding and hybridity. The chapter on *Wives and Daughters*, by contrast, seems to draw together all the threads of the preceding chapters to provide new insights into Gaskell's relation to her predecessors as she “creatively revises

[their] family fictions” (173). Rather than reject the constraints of the past — as Sayles’s characters somewhat unconvincingly suggest they will do — Corbett explores and expands them by, in her words,

emphasizing the diversity within Austen’s representations of family, marriage, and the relation between the two; by construing both adoption and biological reproduction as key sites at which the Brontës, Eliot, and Gaskell differently articulate the shifting relations among affinity, consanguinity, and the politics of familial, national, or imperial belonging; [and] by identifying the differences within marital, sexual, and familial practices that we have too readily relegated to the convenient but misleading shorthand of “incestuous,” “exogamous,” or “heterosexual.” (205)

Corbett’s book represents a useful corrective and provides a convincing contribution to our understanding of domestic fictions of all kinds, our own included.

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Devoney Looser, *Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain, 1750–1850*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. 252 pp.

In *Women Writers and Old Age in Great Britain*, Devoney Looser suggests that examining the late careers of British women writers is a necessarily “compensatory gesture” for nineteenth-century critics who have focused upon issues of gender and genre without paying adequate attention to the significance of aging, particularly given the notably long lives of many of their literary subjects. As she trenchantly observes, “We have, for more than a century, comprehended the late lives of early modern British women writers too rosily, too darkly, or more often, not at all” (178). Looser unapologetically identifies the source of such misrepresentation and neglect as “ageism, whether malignant or benign” (168), and identifies some of the larger repercussions of disregarding the total arc of a literary career. Close analysis of the lives and works of nineteenth-century women writers reveals fissures — or perhaps more accurately bridges — between literary periods constructed around the lives and careers of male writers. The careers of many women writers are often incommensurable with standard literary periodizations, as critics such as Susan Staves, Anne Mellor, and Isobel Armstrong have also noted. Maria Edgeworth and Frances Burney, often identified as “eighteenth-century writers,” both lived and published into the Victorian period, and it would have been impossible for Austen to have acted upon Virginia Woolf’s injunction to pay homage at Burney’s grave, since she died nearly two decades before her “predecessor.” While the fact of the nineteenth-century