

### What Happened to the Victorian Family?

*The End of Domesticity: Alienation from the Family in Dickens, Eliot, and James*. Charles Hatten. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2010. 316 pp.

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<1> In an essay commemorating the centenary of Charlotte Brontë's birth, Virginia Woolf wrote that "the mid-Victorian world ... is the last that we of the present moment wish to see resuscitated," subsequently venturing the view that "there is no single characteristic that so alienates the present generation from Dickens and Thackeray as their insistence upon" the virtuous purity of the domestic ideal.<sup>(1)</sup> In articulating this modernist alienation from Victorian domesticity, Woolf reacts in part against her experience of "the family system" – "its cruelty, its poverty, its hypocrisy, its immorality, its inanity," as she wrote two decades later in *Three Guineas* (1938).<sup>(2)</sup> Just as importantly, as Charles Hatten argues, modernists in general disdained "the prescriptiveness and intensely normative vision of families that characterize midcentury Victorian domestic fiction" (17) and give it both form and content. Such a vision, Hatten believes, arises from the varied ideological uses to which the "normative" middle-class Victorian family is put in midcentury representations, with which we are all by now rather numbingly familiar. The analysis in *The End of Domesticity*, however, emphasizes Hatten's chosen writers' resistance to, rather than "insistence" on, the new (and fleeting) hegemony of a specific form of literary familialism so as to trace the "shift of literary codes in canonical literature, a transformation by which the norms of traditional domestic fiction are gradually dismantled" (33), their sentimentality purged, and their formal effects dispersed. In the literary-historical narrative of Hatten's own project, cast as "a genealogy of emergent modernism within Victorian literature" (257), Charles Dickens both uses familialism to criticize capitalist exploitation and blames the family for social ills; George Eliot "radically subverts orthodox domestic and gender ideology in a fully developed realist mode" (35) with a feminist edge; and Henry James consolidates "the narrative tradition of early modernist antifamilialism" (36), culminating in "the rejection of domestic idealization as a literary mode and its replacement by the representation of the family as a matrix of individual alienation" (257). What Woolf ostensibly jettisons, then, on behalf of "the present generation," her predecessors had already rendered seriously suspect; according to Hatten, Dickens, Eliot, and James indeed aimed to establish their own seriousness as cultural workers within an increasingly stratified literary marketplace by making the critique rather than the celebration of family life the stuff of high art.

<2> Looking back to John Milton, Samuel Richardson, and Walter Scott as key literary figures in producing the “association of ideals of family life with the maintenance of social, sexual and moral hierarchies” (21) within a rapidly changing economic order, the first two chapters on Dickens demonstrate how he deploys mismanaged families and unruly women to symptomatize broadly public concerns. Hatten identifies *The Heart of Midlothian* (1819) as the precursor text for *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), in both of which “a weak hero, familial fragility, and effective fatherlessness provide[s] the matrix of popular revolt” (47). Repairing these failures of patriarchal control through fictional means, Dickens not incidentally “focused heavily on the dissemination of th[e] new familial ideology” (39) as a tool for consolidating his professional standing as a novelist. Thus in *Dombey and Son* (1846-48), Hatten contends, “domesticity can be deployed to critique market values that dominate bourgeois culture and deprive it of humanity and compassion” (25), underlining “a new cultural centrality to the ideal of the family and home as a space resistant to material pressures” (24). Such moves position Dickens as arbiter of the domestic ideal, which he commodifies to his own material and professional advantage. Yet Hatten also locates the seeds of the domestic ideal’s decay, as both an ideological and a formal construct, within Dickens’ work, whereby “the failure of domesticity in the Dombey circle is the master key for diagnosing the moral bankruptcy of his bourgeois ethos” (68). *David Copperfield* (1849-50) further registers “Dickens’s resistance to, and ambivalence about, the constraints of Victorian domestic pieties” (87), with Hatten’s particular focus on his scapegoating of female characters – Dora, Emily, and the bad wives/mothers of the later works – who take the rap for the failure of the domestic to provide a stable haven for heterosexual men.

<3> In his third and fourth chapters, Hatten reads Eliot’s fiction as responding to and revising Dickens’ view of femininity, in her expansion of the interior lives of her female characters and her careful attention to the impact of industrial capitalism on women. A key difference between the two novelists after *Adam Bede* (1859), which “replicates ... the typical narrative displacement of larger societal dynamics onto failed femininity that we typically find in Dickens” (148), lies in Eliot’s awareness that the narrowness of Maggie Tulliver’s lot is directly connected to the disappearance of economic and social opportunities for aspiring middle-class women over the course of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The “problem of feminine desire” (164), whether for fine jewels or even finer music, makes itself felt in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) as a protest against this oppressive narrowness. Given Hatten’s title, however, I expected a good deal more in this chapter on the familial dynamics of the novel; as elsewhere in the book, the practices and forms of heterosexual marriage garner more of his attention than cross- or intergenerational family relationships. Where the chapter ends instead is with the rise of sensation fiction in the 1860s, which primarily identified sexual transgression, as does *The Mill*, with female desire. Hatten argues that the shock and horror some Victorians felt at Maggie’s fall anticipates the response to sensational developments later in the decade and also functions to mute Eliot’s (and other women writers’) further explorations of female sexuality. Moving on to *Daniel Deronda* (1876) in the next chapter, Hatten suggests that sensation itself – best exemplified in the novel by the scandalous secret of Grandcourt’s unofficial family – “disrupted the conventions of Victorian domestic fiction and prepared the ground for Eliot’s more refined novel” (191). This discussion advances one of the book’s larger arguments, that antipathy for the confines and constraints of the domestic, in literature as in life, signifies the avant-garde aesthetic sensibility that we associate with modernism, albeit best represented in *Daniel Deronda* by the proud alienation of the Alcharisi from the constraints of (Jewish) marriage and motherhood.

<4> Hatten's reading of *The Wings of the Dove* (1902) in the final chapter aims to bring together multiple threads of the overall argument. Against the backdrop of his late-Victorian struggles with "the indifference or hostility of the mass audience to his literary labors" (229) and his contempt for "a wider audience that he understood as feminized and corrupted by mass culture" (230), James revises Eliot to create "a fully serious art form" (224) that "eliminates traces of romance or Gothic conventions" (225). At the same time, he "circles back to quite conventional, even hackneyed, domestic and courtship narrative models of the mid-Victorian era" (236) although his "indeterminate" (227) endings short-circuit the closure on which such models typically rely. *The Wings of the Dove* thematizes the persistent association of authorship, marriage, and female sexuality with prostitution in the age of mass commodification, aligning "James's resistance to and subversion of a conventional courtship narrative" – here the triangulated attachment of Kate Croy, Merton Densher, and Milly Theale – "with the resistance to commodification itself" (252) that all three characters also exhibit. Once again, the emphasis is less on psychic alienation from what Samuel Butler first termed "the family system," in *The Way of All Flesh* (1903), and more on the vicissitudes of courtship and marriage. Though Hatten reads the text in interesting ways, collapsing family plots into marriage plots, as he repeatedly does, blurs important distinctions between them.

<5> Unsurprisingly, *The End of Domesticity* turns to Woolf for its own end, making good points about Mr. Bankes' "masculine antifamilialism" and Lily Briscoe's "feminist alienation from domesticity" (262) in *To the Lighthouse* (1927) on the way to some final comments, on "the persistence of thematics of alienation from domesticity and romance" (263), that are less satisfying than its careful readings of key texts. On the one hand, Hatten wants to argue that "the compulsive production of narratives about alienation from, or the limits of, fulfillment in family life ... are high cultural strategies of literary specialization" (263); on the other, he observes in conclusion that "mass culture has become almost as open to the thematics of domestic alienation as high culture" (264). If indeed "serious" Victorian and modernist writers aimed to distinguish the high-art novel from middlebrow and mass culture by rejecting "the family system" in and as both form and content, then their tactics either failed or were so widely appropriated by others as to make the distinction untenable. (Interestingly, Woolf's own late representation of "the family system" in *The Years* [1937] topped the best-seller list in the United States, coming in second one week only to *Gone with the Wind*.)<sup>(3)</sup> Although I found this line of argument unpersuasive, that *The End of Domesticity* as a whole invites us to revisit the persistence of Victorian frameworks into modernism and beyond indicates the continuing relevance and vitality of family thinking to those artists who seek, as Woolf did, to find new modes for novelistic representation and social critique.

## Endnotes

(1) Virginia Woolf, "Charlotte Brontë," *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Andrew McNeillie, 5 vols. (San Diego: Harvest/HBJ, 1986-2009): 2, 27; "Dickens by a Disciple," *Essays* 3, 27.<sup>(^)</sup>

(2) Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (Orlando: Harvest, 2006): 49.<sup>(^)</sup>

(3) Brenda R. Silver, *Virginia Woolf Icon* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999): 301n.17.<sup>(^)</sup>