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Desultory Vivacity

By [Rohan Maitzen](#)

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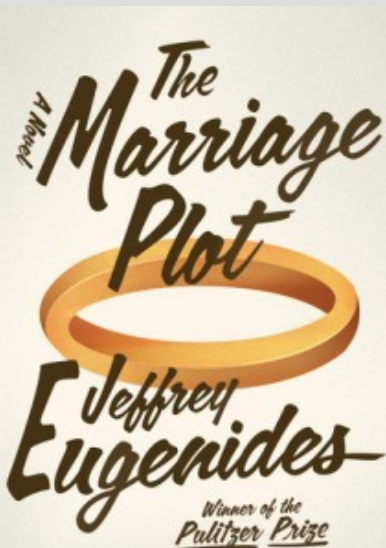
[The Marriage Plot](#)

By Jeffrey Eugenides

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011.

We belated historians must not linger after his example; and if we did so, it is probable that our chat would be thin and eager, as if delivered from a campstool in a parrot-house.

(George Eliot, *Middlemarch*)



I should have been the ideal reader for Jeffrey Eugenides's *The Marriage Plot*. I was only a few years behind his heroine, Madeleine Hanna, in college. As students, we had many of the same books on our shelves: “a lot of Dickens, a smidgen of Trollope, along with good helpings of Austen, George Eliot, and the redoubtable Brontë sisters” (now, I have a lot more Trollope than a “smidgen”). I too got a “better idea of what deconstruction is from reading [Jonathan] Culler than from reading Derrida”—in fact, Culler himself taught my own

theory seminar—and like Madeleine's friends I read the Marquis de Sade for classes in which we analyzed the political, rather than the erotic, potential of "his shocking sex scenes." I even went on to become a Victorianist, as Madeleine hopes to do: now I assign Frances Power Cobbe's essay "Criminals, Idiots, Women, and Minors," which helps Madeleine learn that the Victorians "were a lot less Victorian than you thought," in my own course on the Victorian 'Woman Question.'

I became a Victorianist: ay, there's the rub. Because it turns out that *The Marriage Plot* is not really a novel for those who love Victorian novels, for those who believe, with Madeleine, that "nineteenth-century literature ... [is] anything but old hat." "Old hat" is precisely Eugenides's view of the marriage plot novels to which his title cheekily alludes. I didn't think so at first: I assumed authorial distance from the premise of Madeleine's undergraduate thesis, that "by 1900 the marriage plot was no more," and I looked forward to seeing how Eugenides was going to explore the complexities of courtship and marriage under modern conditions, which have surely multiplied, not foreclosed, the fictional possibilities. With the promise of rich intertextuality implicit in Eugenides's early invocation of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Middlemarch*, and *The Portrait of a Lady*, I anticipated many readerly delights to come for someone like me, but alas, it was not to be. In choosing not to take marriage seriously as a structuring device, Eugenides apparently decided not to take his characters, his novel, or his literary antecedents seriously either. The result is precisely the thin and eager, if incidentally entertaining, chat against which *Middlemarch* cautions itself—and against *Middlemarch*, how thin, indeed, does *The Marriage Plot* seem!

It's not that *The Marriage Plot* doesn't resemble its nineteenth-century predecessors or include parallels or allusions to them. The most obvious similarity is its starting premise: it tells the story of young people on the threshold of their adult lives. The crucial modern rite of passage is college graduation, and that's the point at which we join Madeleine, Mitchell, and Leonard, all of whom are graduating from Eugenides's *alma mater*, Brown University. Madeleine, the English major, is the privileged tennis-playing daughter of a retired college president; Mitchell has converted from English to religious studies and is keeping his attraction to Catholicism secret from his Greek parents; brilliant manic-depressive Leonard is a biology major with a sideline in philosophy. The three of them are in what would be a "love triangle" if they or their novel believed in love. Madeleine certainly thinks she believes in it, and feels it; the one book she appreciates from her semiotics seminar is Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse*, which captures "what she had been so far mutely feeling" for Leonard:

What we have been able to say below about waiting, anxiety, memory is no more than a modest supplement offered to the reader to be made free with, to be added to, subtracted from, and passed on to others: around the figure, the players pass the handkerchief which sometimes, by a final parenthesis, is held a second longer before handing it on. (Ideally, the book would be a cooperative: 'To the United Readers and Lovers.')

It wasn't only that this writing seemed beautiful to Madeleine. It wasn't only that these opening sentences of Barthes' made immediate sense. It wasn't only the relief at recognizing that here, finally, was a book she might write her final paper on. What made Madeleine sit up in bed was something closer to the reason she read books in the first place and had always loved them. Here was a sign she wasn't alone.

It is characteristic of Madeleine that she seeks affirmation and guidance from books. “She’d become an English major,” we’re told, “for the purest and dullest of reasons: because she loved to read.” Like many an English major before and since the Class of 1982, Madeleine realizes that love of reading, while certainly a necessary condition for pursuing her degree, is nowhere near a sufficient one. Though Madeleine thrills to classes like “Hawthorne and James” or “Victorian Fantasy: From *Phantastes* to *The Water-Babies*,” the critical times are changing. She begins “hearing people saying ‘Derrida.’ She hear[s] them saying ‘Lyotard’ and ‘Foucault’ and ‘Deleuze’ and ‘Baudrillard.’” As she labors over her thesis on nineteenth-century fiction, she worries that she has “nothing like a firm critical methodology to apply to what she read. Instead, she had a fuzzy, unsystematic way of talking about books.” The name-droppers are the kind of people Madeleine “instinctually disapproved of—upper-middle-class kids who wore Doc Martens and anarchist symbols”—but eventually she feels she can “no longer ignore the contrast between the hard-up, blinky people in her Beowulf seminar and the hipsters down the hall reading Maurice Blanchot,” and so she signs up for Semiotics 211, to “find out what everyone else was talking about.” It’s there that she meets and falls for Leonard.

Eugenides presents Semiotics 211 as an exercise in pretentious pseudo-intellectualism. The course is presided over by Professor Zipperstein (a name inevitably reminiscent of David Lodge’s Professor Morris Zapp, also an academic opportunist and *poseur*). Semiotics is “the form Zipperstein’s midlife crisis had taken,” Madeleine decides: “Instead of leaving his wife, Zipperstein had left the English department. Instead of buying a sports car, he’d bought deconstruction.” Madeleine herself doesn’t understand most of the course readings, and she chafes at trendy ideas like the death of the author or “the need to stop thinking of books as being about things,” not just “about other books.” Her own resistance is largely inarticulate, but her interest in Leonard is sparked by his Johnsonian “I refute it thus!” responses to the metaphysical posturing of their more theoretically experienced classmates, eight of whom have already taken “Introduction to Semiotic Theory” (a symptom of this is their uniform of “black T-shirts and ripped black jeans”). “I’m finding it hard to introduce myself, actually,” says one of these, Thurston, during the ritual seminar introductions, “because the whole idea of social introductions is so problematized.” When Leonard’s turn comes, he identifies himself as a biology major with no previous experience in semiotics, adding “that his parents had named him Leonard, that it had always seemed pretty handy to have a name, especially when you were being called in to dinner, and that if anyone wanted to call him Leonard he would answer to it.”

As Semiotics 211 gets underway, the contrast between Thurston, our representative Theory Head, and Leonard, our proxy Man of Common Sense, defines the debates. In a telling discussion of Peter Handke’s autobiographical *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams*, Thurston embraces it as “dark and depressing,” and focuses on it as an experimental “fictionalization.” “Suicide is a trope,” he announces. “Especially in German literature. You’ve got *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. . . My theory is that Handke felt the weight of all that tradition and this book was his attempt to break free.” Suicide, in other words, is a literary convention: “we’ve read the sentimental, filial account of a cherished dead parent before . . . it doesn’t have any power anymore.” Against this cold intellectualism, Leonard asserts the value of real life and real emotion: “if your mother kills herself it’s not a literary trope.”

I struggled enough in my own theory seminar to sympathize with Leonard’s kicking-the-stone

approach. Yet I found myself impatient with Eugenides's polarizing reduction of the possibilities here, and thus by extension throughout his novel. He prefers to go for the easy laugh ("Madeleine championed a virtue that had fallen out of esteem: namely, clarity") rather than sort out what insights we gained from the complexities and even the obscurities of theory. In this particular example, it's as clearly inadequate to reject the literariness of language (or, to borrow a little from the jargon of semiotics, the ways in which texts are collections of signs) as it is to dissociate literature altogether from life. Of course your mother's suicide is not, itself, a literary trope, but Thurston is more right than Leonard about the difficulties of *writing* about her suicide "when all of the writing that's been done on that subject has robbed you of any originality of expression." Madeleine's own response to Thurston—"It was maybe true, what he said, but it shouldn't have been"—is equally unsatisfactory because it is not a response but a retreat back to the zone of the fuzzy and unsystematic.

That Eugenides's own sympathies are squarely with Madeleine and Leonard is strongly suggested by his derisory descriptions of Thurston as someone who "aspired to be a person who would react to his own mother's suicide with high-literary remorselessness," and by the absence, more generally, of anyone in *The Marriage Plot* who both takes literary theory seriously *and* makes a serious claim on our interest. Madeleine suspects that "most semiotic theorists had been unpopular as children, often bullied or overlooked, and so had directed their lingering rage onto literature." Their purported commitment to radical new ways of understanding literature, including decentering the writer and the book in favor of the reader and the text, means nothing more to her than a hunger for power: "They wanted the reader to be the main thing. Because *they* were readers." Then there's Claire, the Cixous-and-Kristeva-reading girlfriend of Mitchell's friend Larry, who rolls her eyes when she sees Mitchell reading Hemingway and chastises him for ogling passing women. Mitchell's resentful fulminations might suggest, to the suspicious reader, that Eugenides felt bullied or overlooked by feminists during his days at Brown and was channeling his lingering rage through his character:

College feminists made fun of skyscrapers, saying they were phallic symbols. They said the same thing about space rockets, even though, if you stopped to think about it, rockets were shaped the way they were not because of phallocentrism but because of aerodynamics. Would a vagina-shaped *Apollo 11* have made it to the moon? Evolution had created the penis. It was a useful structure for getting certain things done. . . . But no—anything large or grand in design, any long novel, big sculpture, or towering building, became, in the opinion of the "women" Mitchell knew at college, manifestations of male insecurity about the size of their penises.

Claire's hectoring does prompt some awkward self-reflection:

"Just looking at women doesn't mean I objectify them."

"What are you doing to them, then?"

"*Looking* at them."

"Because you want to fuck them."

This was, more or less, true. Suddenly, in the castigating light of Claire's gaze, Mitchell was ashamed of himself.

But Claire is really just a comic obstacle to Mitchell and Larry's trip to India, which finally gets underway when Larry and Claire split up: "She thinks she might be into women. She's not sure." There's no more effort to contextualize, much less engage with, her enthusiasm for *l'écriture féminine* than there is to consider semiotics from any point of view than the bemused outsider's. All these theories and their practitioners are, for Eugenides, just stock figures for satire, impediments to the kind of narrative pleasure that Madeleine comes to see as an escape: "How wonderful it was when one sentence followed logically from the sentence before! What exquisite guilt she felt, wickedly enjoying narrative!"



Wicked enjoyment of narrative is what Eugenides is after in *The Marriage Plot*, and to a large extent, because he is a clever storyteller and a deft stylist, he succeeds. The story of Madeleine's, Leonard's, and Mitchell's romantic and other misadventures is full of entertaining episodes and Eighties period detail. Mitchell seeks enlightenment in his travels, but his guy's version of *Eat, Pray, Love* ends as he heads home spiritually unfulfilled, still hoping for a happily-ever-after with Madeleine. Leonard takes up a position as a research fellow in a laboratory studying the mating behavior of yeast cells; Madeleine accompanies him, working away at revisions on an essay she hopes to publish in *The Janeite Review* but not making much progress, "for the simple irrefutable reason that her duty to Leonard came first." That duty arises from Leonard's manic-depression, which is treated with lithium by his doctors and with disturbing levity by Eugenides. One of the zaniest sequences in the novel involves Leonard, fed up with side-effects including dry mouth, mental dullness and low sex drive, deciding to "manage" his illness himself by tapering off his medication against medical advice. He ends up euphoric and horny in a saltwater taffy shop; after a giddy encounter with the understandably trepidatious girl at the counter, he emerges with a trash bag full of taffy and an erection, both of which he brings home triumphantly to Madeleine. It's all very funny in the moment, but the minute you stop to think about it—the minute you separate yourself from Leonard's manic perspective—it's not funny at all, except at his expense.

Nonetheless, Eugenides does take us with considerable skill through his characters' experience, though at times there does seem to be a purposeless superfluity of information. Must we know so much about Madeleine's sister's breastfeeding decisions? Why include the entirety of Mitchell's mother's long, boring letter? Does it matter that Mitchell buys "bottled water, mandarins, a chocolate bar, a packet of biscuits, and a hunk of strange crumbly cheese" as provisions for a train trip? But an admirer of Dickens and Trollope is on thin ice objecting to digressions, and in fact Eugenides lost me not because I wanted less but because I wanted *more* from him. Not more plot,

characters, or colorful details: no, I wanted more meaning to attach to the elements he had already accumulated, to give his novel more of the shape and, ultimately, the substance of the nineteenth-century novels which are his references.

The marriage plots in Austen, Eliot and James are formal structures, scaffolds on which the authors build complex social as well as personal analyses. The process of courtship in them is impeded, not just by accidents of plot or weaknesses of character, but by obstacles of principle—by mismatched values, or by social or economic inequalities. To Madeleine, the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 is only boring historical context for her thesis, but it was crucial to the reality of nineteenth-century novelists, who knew perfectly well (because they lived it every day) that the personal was political. Thus in their novels, marriage is never a literary end in itself. The ending of *Pride and Prejudice* is wonderfully satisfying, not simply because there's a wedding (though who can resist Mrs Bennet effusing—"so handsome! so tall!"), but because Elizabeth Bennet and Mr Darcy have undergone a process of mutual reeducation in order to bring one about. Their individual transformations carry us along to a new world in which Elizabeth's resolution "to act in that manner, which will, in [her] own opinions, constitute [her] happiness," without deference to the Lady Catherine de Bourghs of the world, is met by Mr Darcy's chagrined acknowledgment that his original pride deserved "the severest reproof." The poignantly beautiful ending of *Middlemarch*, on the other hand, leaves us dissatisfied, because though nobody but Dorothea is quite contented with her choice, "no one stated exactly what else that was in her power she ought rather to have done"—it's not just in going past the wedding ceremony that the later novels Madeleine considers for her thesis get "more complicated and considerably darker."

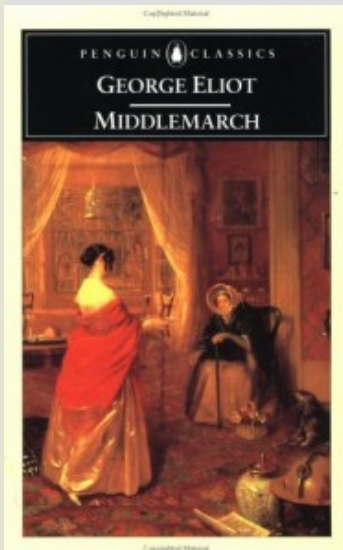
The Marriage Plot, in contrast, gives us the details of its characters' lives but no broader perspective, no contextualizing social analysis, no critique or celebration to guide our relationship to them and their aspirations. Clinging closely to his characters' points of view, Eugenides gives us no more than they perceive, which means accepting their limitations. As they are young, imperfectly educated, lacking in self-awareness and understandably unable to see their own lives in historical perspective, these limitations are substantial. Why things are the way they are for them—in love and in marriage, but also in academia, in laboratories, in psychiatric hospitals, in religion—Eugenides makes no effort to explain, any more than he directs us towards how *else* they could or should be. Thus he gives us only the surface of a compelling social novel, not the substance.

No doubt he does so in service of a view that life itself does not conform to the patterns we find in books, including in marriage plot novels. "There is no happiness in love," is the Trollopian epigraph to Madeleine's thesis, "except at the end of an English novel." But while it's true that real life may be episodic, impressionistic, purposeless, fiction surely need not be. Eugenides apparently agrees with Madeleine's supervisor, Professor Saunders, that "sexual equality, good for women, had been bad for the novel."

And divorce had undone it completely. What would it matter whom Emma married if she could file for separation later? How would Isabel Archer's marriage to Gilbert Osmond have been affected by the existence of a prenup? As far as Saunders was concerned, marriage didn't mean much anymore, and neither did the novel. Where could you find the marriage plot nowadays? You couldn't. You had to read historical fiction. You had to read non-Western novels involving traditional societies. Afghan novels,

Indian novels. You had to go, literarily speaking, back in time.

If it doesn't matter whom Madeleine marries, what *does* matter? Through what plot will the heroine of the 1980s seek fulfillment? What new story sets the terms for meaning "nowadays"? Eugenides evades these questions. Rejecting marriage as the resolution for both him and his characters, Eugenides opts for an open-endedness that feels like irresolution.



I would have thought the obvious alternative is the novel of vocation, an incoherent form for women in nineteenth-century novels because marriage was presumed to *be* their vocation. And in fact, unlike Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse, Dorothea Brooke, or Isabel Archer, Madeleine does have a career plan: to become a literary academic. At the end of the novel Madeleine is accepted to do graduate studies at Columbia (appropriately, she is rejected by Yale, at the time a hotbed of deconstruction). She is excited, but the novel's consistently satirical treatment of academia has hardly set us up to see embarking on a Ph.D. in literature as a heroic quest. More, the story of Madeleine's discovery of her vocation relentlessly trivializes it. During a thrilling weekend at a Victorian studies conference, Madeleine senses "the emergence of a new class of academics ... talking about all the old books she loved, but in new ways":

The topics included: "Women of Property in the Victorian Novel," "Victorian Women Writers and the Woman Question," "Masturbation in Victorian Literature," and "The Prison of Womanhood."

She and her friends even have a celebrity sighting, spotting "Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar coming out of a *Madwoman in the Attic* talk where there were no seats left." "The entire weekend, they didn't even ask if she had a boyfriend," Madeleine reflects happily when it's over. "They just wanted to talk about literature." "Daddy, I know what I want to be," she announces breathlessly when she phones home; "A Victorianist!" That word "made her fuzzy aspirations suddenly real."

Her naiveté at this point is understandable (and realistic: I know from personal experience that there is a never-ending supply of idealistic young women students inspired by their love of reading Austen and Gaskell and George Eliot to speak and do pretty much as she does). At no point in the novel, however, is she, or are we, moved to take her aspirations seriously. After the conference, she "managed to score a huge stack of Victorian criticism" (*psst*, buddy: there's more where that

came from!). Armed with this and an old Royal typewriter, she sets about “trying to condense her thesis into a publishable size.” It’s a challenging project:

Sometimes when she was typing quickly two or three keys would glom together and she’d have to separate them with her fingers, gaining a new understanding of the term *manual typewriter*. Unsticking the keys or changing the ribbon left her fingers ink-stained. . . . Trying to clean the Royal wasn’t easy. It weighed a ton. No matter how many times she managed to lug it to the sink and turn it over, it never stopped leaking detritus. Bringing it back to her desk, she put a sheet of paper in the roller and set to work again, but the nagging thought that the gunk remained in the typewriter, as well as the constant sticking of the keys, made her forget what she’d been writing. And so she took the typewriter back to the sink and got the rest of the gunk out with an old toothbrush.

“In this manner,” we’re told, “Madeleine tried to become a Victorianist.” When her essay finally appears in the *Janeite Review*, it’s “a marvelous thing to see, even though a printing error had transposed two pages of the essay.”

Compare this impish superficiality with the passage from Chapter XV of *Middlemarch* (from which I’ve taken my epigraph) in which Tertius Lydgate, stumbling across an explanation of the operation of the heart’s valves, discovers *his* vocation and feels “the growth of an intellectual passion.” Here Eliot too explores the limits of the conventional marriage plot, observing,

We are not afraid of telling over and over again how a man comes to fall in love with a woman and be wedded to her, or else be fatally parted from her. Is it due to excess of poetry or of stupidity that we are never weary of describing what King James called a woman’s “makdom and her fairnesse,” never weary of listening to the twanging of the old Troubadour strings, and are comparatively uninterested in that other kind of “makdom and fairnesse” which must be wooed with industrious thought and patient renunciation of small desires?

She is led to reflect on the forces that conspire against even the most ardent of men, those “who once meant to shape their own deeds and alter the world a little” but end up “coming to be shapen after the average and fit to be packed by the gross”: “you and I may have sent some of our breath towards infecting them, when we uttered our conforming falsities or drew our silly conclusions.” It was passages like this that inspired *me* to become a Victorianist: Eliot draws us into the novel with her characters and then urges us back out into the world yearning to make it a better place, a place that nurtures “industrious thought,” a place that makes it possible for its Lydgates to “shape their own deeds” and its Dorotheas to do more than live “faithfully a hidden life and rest in unvisited tombs.”

Even at their most comic, the great Victorian novels take themselves seriously, and take us, their readers, seriously as well. That’s what I fell in love with—that, and of course the enormous pleasure of reading them. Becoming a Victorianist doesn’t require you to sacrifice any of that love—I certainly never have. It does mean committing yourself to understanding as much as you can about the books you love, and about a lot of other books too, sometimes in ways that grate against your earlier, more spontaneous responses. It also means teaching (a great way to share that love)

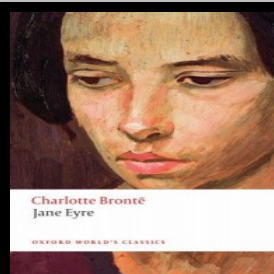
and doing research and going to conferences, and a lot more besides, including mentoring students like Madeleine so that they make informed choices about their own academic futures. But Eugenides acknowledges no such substance, no such sincerity, in Madeleine's ambitions. Her scholarly aspirations are cute but laughable, and in this context Mitchell's climactic speech surely rings hollow:

"From the books you read for your thesis, and for your article—the Austen and the James and everything—was there any novel where the heroine gets married to the wrong guy, and then realizes it, and then the other suitor shows up, some guy who's always been in love with her, and then *they* get together, but finally the second suitor realizes that the last thing the woman needs is to get married again, that she's got more important things to do with her life. And so finally the guy doesn't propose at all, even though he still loves her? Is there any book that ends like that?"

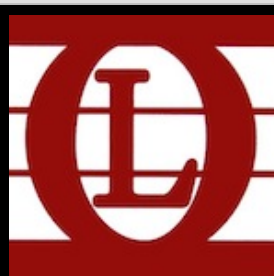
"No," Madeleine replies. "But don't you think that would be good? As an ending?" asks Mitchell. "Yes," answers Madeleine finally, "smiling gratefully," and I agree, it *would* be good, but *The Marriage Plot* is not ultimately that novel. True, there's no pressing need, either personal or fictional, for Madeleine to marry again, but where is the novel's investment in something "more important"? We end the novel with the characters scarcely more developed than they began, starting all over again on the arduous task of defining their adult lives. The real marriage plot novel, or whatever its new incarnation will be, appears to be only now beginning, as this one ends rather than concludes. In this arch play with readerly expectations, Eugenides turns out, ironically, to be more of a postmodernist than we knew.

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