



Multiple Marriages in Victorian Literature

[*The Bigamy Plot: Sensation and Convention in the Victorian Novel*](#). Maia McAleavey. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. 258 pp.

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<1>Maia McAleavey's critical text, part of the well-respected Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture series, examines a trope that simultaneously shocked the Victorians, while also being one possible recourse after a failed first marriage: bigamy. McAleavey's text joins a rich body of scholarship exploring the representation of this trope within contemporary culture and popular literature (for instance, Ginger Frost's *Living in Sin*[2008]), but expands the field by cross-comparing best-selling with canonical literature. It is this intervention in the field that McAleavey advances by arguing that 'focusing on plot illuminates unexpected relationships between canonical and popular texts, allowing us to imagine new literary-historical genealogies' (13); as bigamy transcends genre, so the highbrow / lowbrow literary divide is not an obstacle for its interrogation.

<2>In considering both popular and canonical texts, McAleavey recounts the 'wide range of variations' under the term 'bigamy,' from the 'inadvertent' and the 'entirely mistaken', to the 'recklessly bigamous' and the 'deliberately shammed' (2). However,

the text would have benefitted from a more decisive working definition as McAleavey considers not only the traditional trope of people who marry while their first spouse is still living, but also people who remarry after divorce (bigamy as it relates to Ecclesiastical law) and the aborted bigamy plot, as well as those whose relationships with their second spouse begin while the first is still alive, which she refers to as 'sequential remarriage' (3). This wide-ranging inclusion demonstrates the adaptability of the bigamy plot, and a clearer definition would have helped her readers follow all of the different iterations.

<3> *The Bigamy Plot* is conveniently split into three separate sections, each of which contextualises bigamy with historical and cultural, as well as literary analysis. Part I, entitled 'A Wife and Not A Wife,' examines bigamy within space and place as disruptive elements to the traditional courtship narrative. While the dominant form of the 'marriage or death' ending suggests a linear plot to people's lives, bigamy, McAleavey argues, disrupts this pattern. In Elizabeth Gaskell's *Sylvia's Lovers* (1860), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Mrs Henry Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), not only does bigamy suggest a temporal duplication of the marriage plot, but a spatial one, as the two spouses can live in the same house at the same time — the 'spouse in the house' — effectively repeating the courtship pattern.

<4> In Part II 'Dead Yet Not Dead', McAleavey details how the temporal and spatial significance of dual spouses takes on new significance when read alongside the religious doctrine of a 'heavenly reunion' in the afterlife (71), especially if the second relationship is foreshadowed while the first spouse still lives. This section draws upon Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1850) as 'angelic bigamy' (72), allowing David to fantasise that he will share heaven with both of his wives simultaneously. George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1874), on the other hand, examines the erotic overlap of spouses and how the first spouse can dictate the second's relationship. McAleavey contends that while Dorothea does not commit bigamy, Eliot's narrative structure indicates the 'simultaneous relationships' she has with Casaubon and Will (95), and that in both of these texts the 'second love is born out of the first, and shares the stage for an uncomfortable period with its predecessor' (97).

<5> Part III's 'Sensational and Canonical' section engages with the texts most (in)famously linked with bigamy, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) and *Aurora Floyd* (1863), alongside two novels whose bigamy plot is somewhat 'unremarked' (18): William Thackeray's *Pendennis* (1848) and Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895). By examining the return of the first spouse from the 'forgotten geography' of the colonies (133), McAleavey demonstrates how bigamy re-evaluates the binary opposition between metropole and colony to disrupt 'Victorian imperial self-satisfaction' (140) as a common literary and cultural discourse. In the final chapter, McAleavey returns to her interrogation of bigamy's disruption of the courtship plot to

argue that it allows individuals to express 'personal choice' (142), and, through a 'philosophical and social critique' (167), reject the Victorian novel's preoccupation with using marriage as a formal ending as *both* paths are taken.

<6>*The Bigamy Plot* does not end there, it contains an excellent Appendix that includes c.270 bigamy novels for readers to follow up on, a fantastic resource for anyone working on marriage, courtship, relationships and, of course, bigamy. But again, with the wide definition McAleavey uses, it is difficult to tell to which 'type' of bigamy each novel subscribes. McAleavey notes that her list includes novels 'that clearly contain the bigamy plot', suggesting the more traditional type of bigamy, rather than simultaneous remarriage that she has discussed within the main body of her text.

<7>Overall, while the subtitle of *The Bigamy Plot* states the focus of the examination is 'the novel', McAleavey could also have signalled more clearly the excellent inclusion of other literary genres that she draws upon, such as ballads, poetry and plays, as well as true-life trial proceedings. The fact that bigamy has a 'multi-generic literary heritage' (171) and so crosses generic, as well as gender and class boundaries, clearly demonstrates how versatile the trope is and McAleavey does a brilliant job of balancing the many different types of bigamy and multiple genres in which it is present. Specifically for the readers of *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, while McAleavey states that bigamy is largely a 'gender-neutral' (2) crime, equally committed by both men and women, some analysis on the specific effects on men and women as a result of their bigamy — are they reprimanded, punished, or set free equally — would have been another interesting dimension to deliberate on. All things considered, McAleavey's is a well-written, widely researched and clearly argued piece of scholarship that will be of value to scholars of canonical and popular literature, gender and genre, and Victorian literature more generally.