

Nineteenth-Century French Studies

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White, Nicholas. *French Divorce Fiction from the Revolution to the First World War*. Oxford: Legenda, 2013. Pp. 195. ISBN: 978-1-907975-47-9

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Adultery, unhappiness, marital deception, crimes of passion: indispensable staples of traditional novelistic plots. But would these become obsolete with the legalization of divorce? Would novelists be left with no available plot lines, with no stories to tell? These were Émile Zola's worries in 1884 when the *loi Naquet*, which finally legalized divorce in France, was passed. Nicholas White's meticulously researched, elegant study of divorce fiction during the Third Republic up until World War I, shows that Zola had nothing to fear. Divorce "offered French fiction a radically novel way of breaking the mold of the traditional family and recasting the limits of its narratives" (1). White's work builds upon and extends his previous study of the family and marriage in *The Family in Crisis in Late Nineteenth-Century French Fiction* (1999). Both works situate family politics within broader socio-cultural trends.

French Divorce Fiction is the first study of a substantial corpus of French fiction written in response to the *loi Naquet*. White pairs canonical writers on divorce (Bourget, Maupassant) with long-neglected authors such as Alphonse Daudet and Anatole France and with the newly rediscovered women writers of the late nineteenth century such as André Léo, Claire Vautier, and Camille Pert; this gives the reader unique perspectives on the rich literary and cultural landscape of fin-de-siècle France. White's research has uncovered a considerable new archive of divorce novels, which he complements with careful and insightful analysis and deep historical knowledge of the social, political, and ideological debates of the time.

Beyond the author's admirable mastery of literary history and the socio-cultural context, the originality of White's ambitious study resides in his theoretical approach to divorce fiction. For conceptual models that explain new forms of reflexivity of modern identity, White turns to contemporary sociologists Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman. Bauman's concept of "liquid modernity" and Giddens's notions of reflexive narrative and confluent love provide new ways of looking at divorce narratives. As White puts it, divorce provides a possibility for "serial plots consonant with the serial lives it permits" (5).

The book is comprised of five chapters. The first and by far the longest chapter offers a compelling and detailed analysis of the history of divorce in France from the Revolution to World War I. White charts social, cultural, and legal history of the debates surrounding divorce through a careful reading of legal documents, the press, and the manifestation in popular art forms such as song and theater. From the Revolution to the Napoleonic code, and from the timid attempts to bring the issue to the fore through the middle decades of the nineteenth century to the enactment of the *loi Naquet* in 1884, divorce was a touchstone for social, political, ideological, and cultural debates. In this chapter White paints an engaging portrait of the man who was instrumental in bringing about the divorce legislation—Alfred Naquet. A brilliant thinker, writer, scientist, and politician who embraced radical leftist ideas, Naquet formulates the most far-reaching and extensive arguments in support of divorce in his extensive study of the question, *Le Divorce*. White offers a reading of this fascinating text against the background of the ideological debates surrounding questions of marriage, family, women's rights, and social mores at the approach of the twentieth century. This chapter will no doubt be an indispensable reference text for anyone interested in the history of divorce in France and its crucial implications for social and cultural history in the nineteenth century and beyond.

The remaining four chapters are comprised of compelling close readings of novels that put divorce to good narrative use, crafting alternatives to the traditional family plots of marriage, adultery, and death. As White explains in chapter two, in novels such as André Léo's *Un divorce* (1866) and Claire Vautier's *Adultère et divorce* (1889), "divorce created a new range of plot permutations, not the least because it offered another ending to the traditional ones of marriage and death" (85). White argues that for many women writers divorce offers unprecedented potential for rewriting and reshaping familiar tropes of adultery. Divorce fiction successfully documents what White calls "the shift from linear to serial lives" (166) and the fascinating new challenges that these new narratives present, such as retrospective jealousy, a theme widespread in divorce fiction. If divorce radically undermined the ideal of bourgeois femininity which prescribed pre-marital virginity and sexual exclusivity as a *sine qua non* of feminine virtue, could a man ever accept a woman with a sexual past?

French Divorce Fiction from the Revolution to the First World War contributes to French literary and cultural history by offering what White calls "an alternative map of the history of narrative" (182) and points forward to our own cultural obsessions with alternative family plots.