



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

Mary Jean Corbett

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In nineteenth-century England, marriage between first cousins was both legally permitted and perfectly acceptable. After mid-century, laws did not explicitly penalize sexual relationships between parents and children, between siblings, or between grandparents and grandchildren. But for a widower to marry his deceased wife's sister was illegal on the grounds that it constituted incest. That these laws and the mores they reflect strike us today as wrongheaded indicates how much ideas about kinship, marriage, and incest have changed.

In *Family Likeness*, Mary Jean Corbett shows how the domestic fiction of novelists including Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Virginia Woolf reflected the shifting boundaries of "family" and even helped refine those borders. Corbett takes up historically contingent and culturally variable notions of who is and is not a relative and whom one can and cannot marry. Her argument is informed by legal and political debates; texts in sociology and anthropology; and discussions on the biology of heredity, breeding, and eugenics. In Corbett's view, marriage within families—between cousins, in-laws, or adoptees—offered Victorian women, both real and fictional, an attractive alternative to romance with a stranger, not least because it allowed them to maintain and strengthen relations with other women within the family.

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