A World Without Fathers

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"CAN ideas transcend their spatial and temporal origins"? This question opens the most recent book by Martin Jay, the seminal historian of the Frankfurt School.[1] You perked up when I wrote "seminal," and I chose that word because the fraught distinction between genesis and validity, in Jay's language, or history and theory, in Kathy Psomiades's, is common to these two projects. But the fatherly aspiration to confirm proper conceptual patrimony—to secure the origin of ideas—is precisely the impulse *Primitive Marriage* thinks against. This means that the dilemma Jay positions at the core of "the history of Western thought,"[2] as he puts it—the primal scene, if you want, of the history of ideas—is already addressed, historicized, and I want to say feminized in *Primitive Marriage*. Psomiades asks how even the most lurid and apparently bad Victorian objects might "exceed their ideological aspects," in her words, and step into the light at other moments, again, as knowledge.[3]

Imagining such movements requires tracking the dynamic yet durational character of Victorian sexuality—and therefore, she helps us see, political thought itself. One twist is that this collapse of the theory/ideology distinction applies not just to Victorian fantasies of group marriage of the 1860s, say, or racial ideologies of the 1870s, but to the words I'm using now, or the ones that make up Psomiades's own book. *Primitive Marriage* was published in spring 2023 but developed, as she notes, over decades of thinking and rethinking. It is the way pearls grow, or gems. This means that the book's ideas, too, are built from conceptual parts condensed and reconfigured in earlier moments; its arguments, like all arguments, thus form archival snapshots of their instants of elaboration, even while they also reach beyond those moments, to stand (as they do in this forum) as theory.

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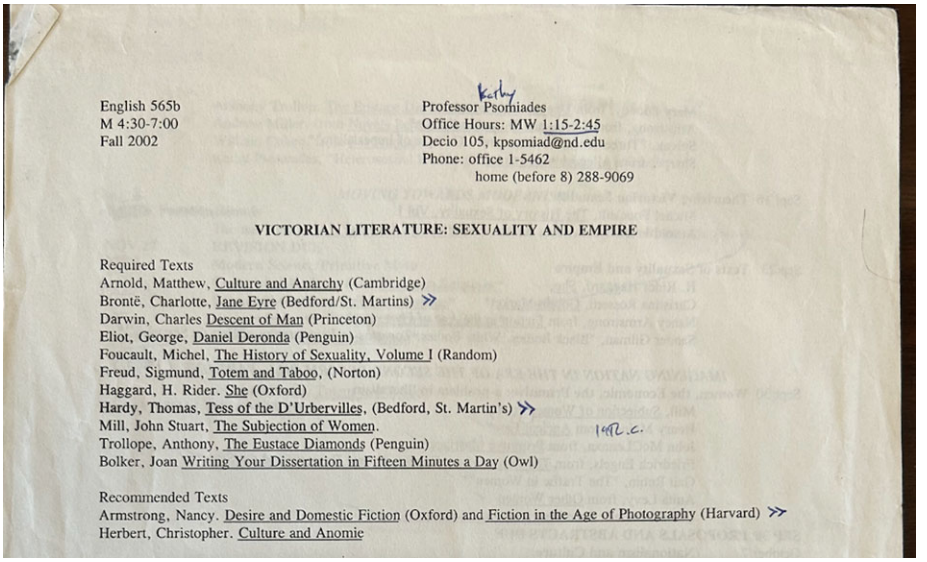
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The principle that all thought is but a twist on what has come before is probably why the figure of *adding* is such a critical but low-key motif in *Primitive* Marriage, a quiet signature. Psomiades writes that Spencer *adds* anthropology to political liberalism (83); Darwin *adds* an aesthetic dimension to political narratives about natural male competition (148). "What Frazer adds to the Müller/Tylor problematic," she says, "is the idea of ritual" (193). Theories of marriage are "what happen when sex *gets added* to economic, political, and social theory" (47; emphasis mine). But it is not just Victorians who bring bright new strings to nests others have occupied before. *What I add to this*: the phrase and its variants recur throughout *Primitive Marriage* with what I found to be a gorgeous regularity. "I would go further than this to say," she says, of an "eloquent" point by Elsie Michie (47). "What I would like to stress in addition to this," she says, of Audrey Jaffe (119). Of Amanda Anderson: "What I would like to add to this account" (108). "My reading here is not so much an alternative to these readings as a supplement" (178).[4]

This accretive, annotative model of knowledge production is dialectical insofar as it understands any concept to emerge from the historical conditions enabling it; it is collaborative insofar as it links thinking agents across bounds of difference; and it is political in that it offers to locate the preconditions for thought in time but then find supplements, blank spots—openings for change. *Victorian Literature: Sexuality and Empire* was the title of the seminar I signed up for in fall 2002, in South Bend, Indiana, in my first semester as a graduate student (fig. 1). I'm sorry to say that I had had, to that point, only intellectual fathers, and perhaps even wanted to be one myself. I confess to ignorance on that score: an unconsidered gender ideology that held ideas always to be emerge from mastery, ownership, origins. But that fall we found no patrimony. We read Freud, Haggard, early anthropology. There were "foundational readings," as my notes say (figs. 2–3), sure, but also generations of elaboration on them: Gilbert, Armstrong, Poovey, Michie. My notes for September 30, 2002, include the phrase "Beyond ideology critique," in scare quotes (fig. 4). Next to it: "A common mantra." Below that: "Victorianism is appropriated as 'good' or 'bad.'" Two lines below: "Where do texts stop thinking?"[5]

In my naïve scrawl from two decades ago, I detect a crystal of the book we celebrate here. But it is no origin. *A world without fathers* is how Psomiades describes the utopian strand of John McClennan's otherwise grotesque *Primitive Marriage* (1865). In Psomiades's recuperation of the obverse and disavowed fantasy world McClennan dreams up, there is no

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English 565b
M 4:30-7:00
Fall 2002

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VICTORIAN LITERATURE: SEXUALITY AND EMPIRE

Required Texts
Arnold, Matthew, Culture and Anarchy (Cambridge)
Brontë, Charlotte, Jane Eyre (Bedford/St. Martins) >>
Darwin, Charles Descent of Man (Princeton)
Eliot, George, Daniel Deronda (Penguin)
Foucault, Michel, The History of Sexuality, Volume I (Random)
Freud, Sigmund, Totem and Taboo, (Norton)
Haggard, H. Rider. She (Oxford)
Hardy, Thomas, Tess of the D'Urbervilles, (Bedford, St. Martin's) >>
Mill, John Stuart, The Subjection of Women.
Trollope, Anthony, The Eustace Diamonds (Penguin)
Bolker, Joan Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day (Owl)

Recommended Texts
Armstrong, Nancy. Desire and Domestic Fiction (Oxford) and Fiction in the Age of Photography (Harvard) >>
Herbert, Christopher. Culture and Anomie

Figure 1. Syllabus from English 565b, "Victorian Literature: Sexuality and Empire," University of Notre Dame, Fall 2002.

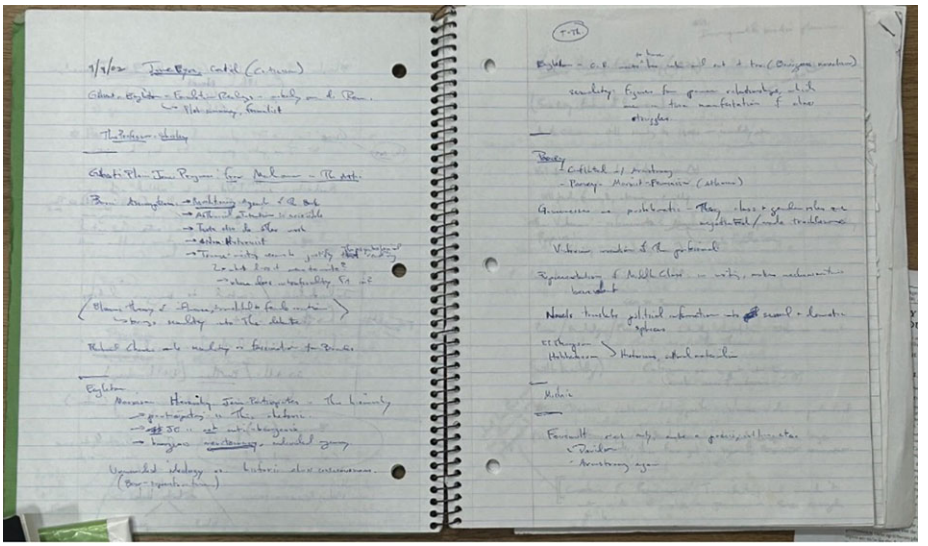


Figure 2. Notebook pages, English 565b, "Victorian Literature: Sexuality and Empire," University of Notre Dame, Fall 2002.

patrilineage, ownership is unknown. Seminality makes no sense. Translated into a practice for thinking, this means lateral relation, kinship without masters, "a universal matrilineal stage" (35). So, rather

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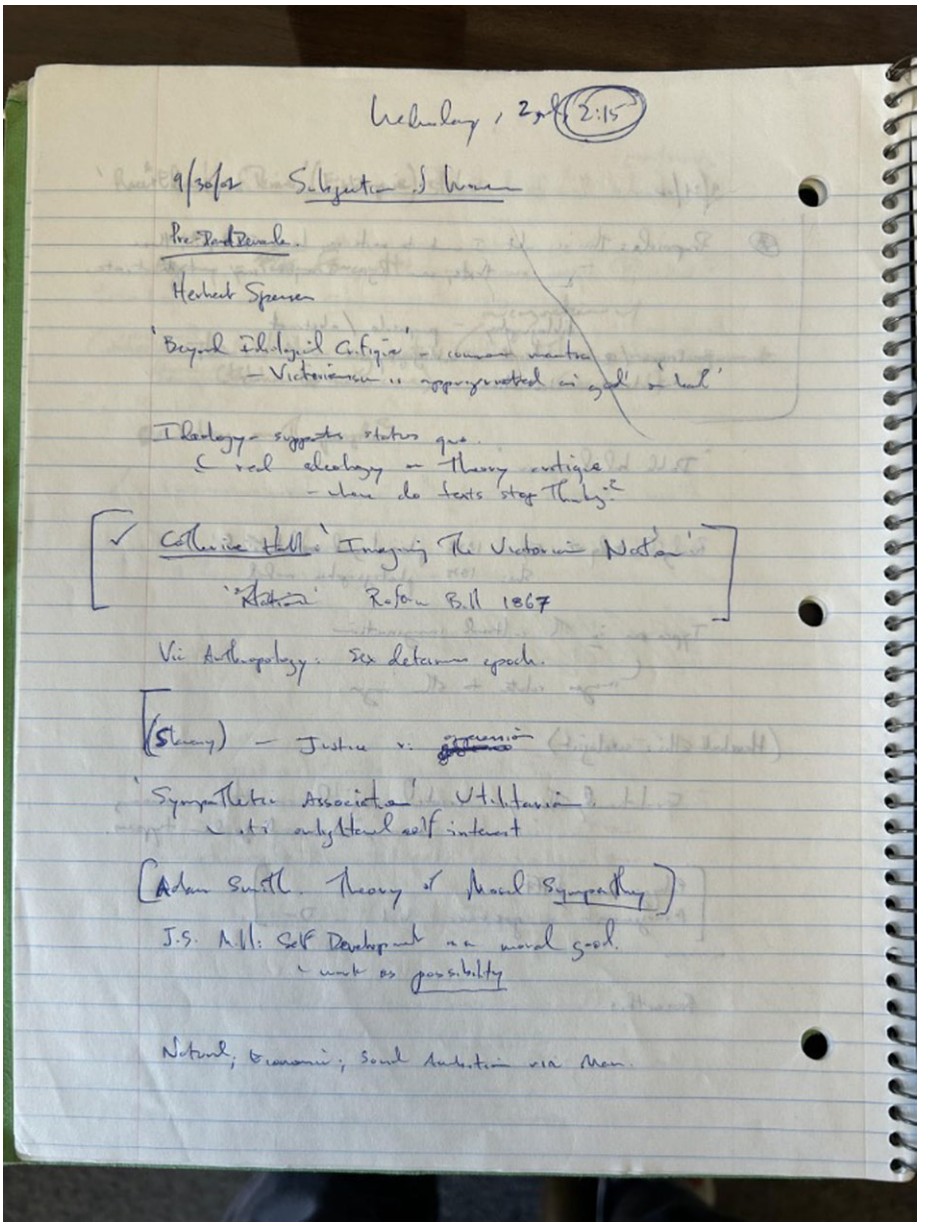


Figure 3. Notebook page, English 565b, "Victorian Literature: Sexuality and Empire," University of Notre Dame, Fall 2002.

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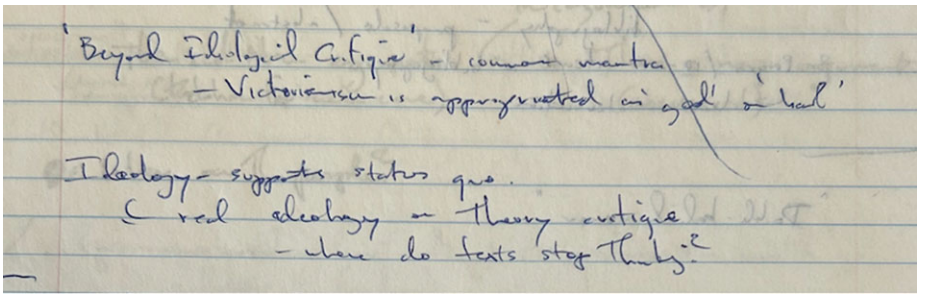


Figure 4. Notebook detail, English 565b, "Victorian Literature: Sexuality and Empire," University of Notre Dame, Fall 2002. Showing "'Beyond Ideological Critique'" and "where do texts stop thinking?"

than origins and rulers, genesis and validity: Who thought this before? How can we keep thought going? "Where do texts stop thinking?"

This specifically feminist approach to knowing calls us into community not just with the mostly women critics to whom Psomiades *adds* in the book, but also with the nineteenth-century figures we might otherwise treat as mere objects. To treat them instead as subjects is to refuse to indulge in the "enormous condescension of posterity," in E.P. Thompson's phrase.[6] This refusal to look down on the past and willingness to be taught by it, I think, is what sponsors the beautiful intellectual density of Psomiades's text, its layered or sedimented conceptual prose. In her acknowledgments, Psomiades says "many people" have "helped [the book] come into being" and gives a genealogy: "I began," she writes, "I continued," but it was Emma Davenport who "g[ot] her through the final revisions" (front matter).

What would a world without fathers look like, in conceptual terms? Construed as a scholarly principle, it might mean giving intellectually to others, over long loops and uneven, purple durations of time, with no expectation of return; it would mean *adding*, presuming others will add, and helping them to do so (figs. 5–6). What I add here is only a suggestion about feminist mentorship and the practices of intellectual solidarity that are both the subject of *Primitive Marriage* and its method. Because texts never stop thinking, these relations go on forever. They are happening right now.

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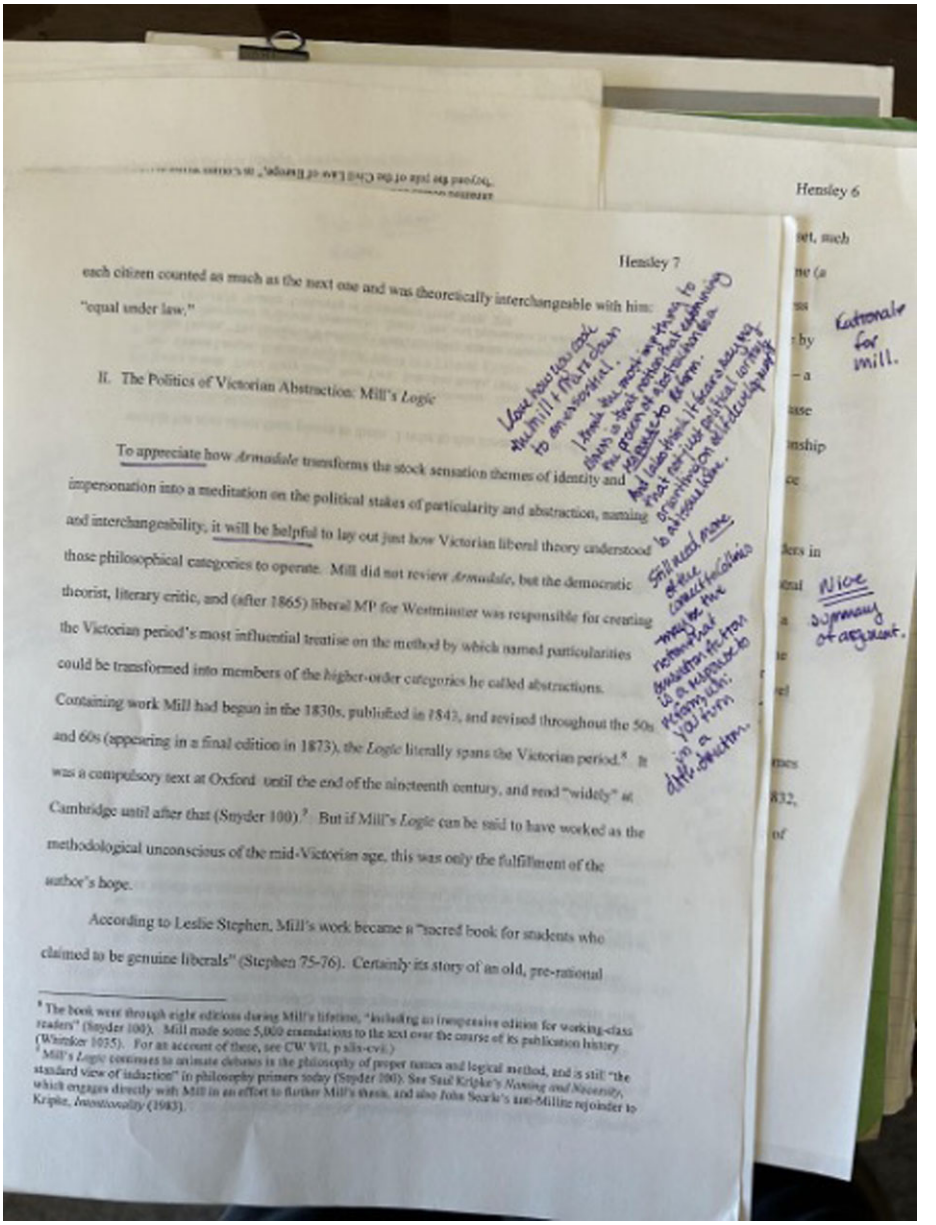


Figure 5. Kathy Psomiades's essay annotations, in purple ink, on Nathan Hensley essay draft, ca. 2008 (?), later to become his first publication. Note "Nice" at right.

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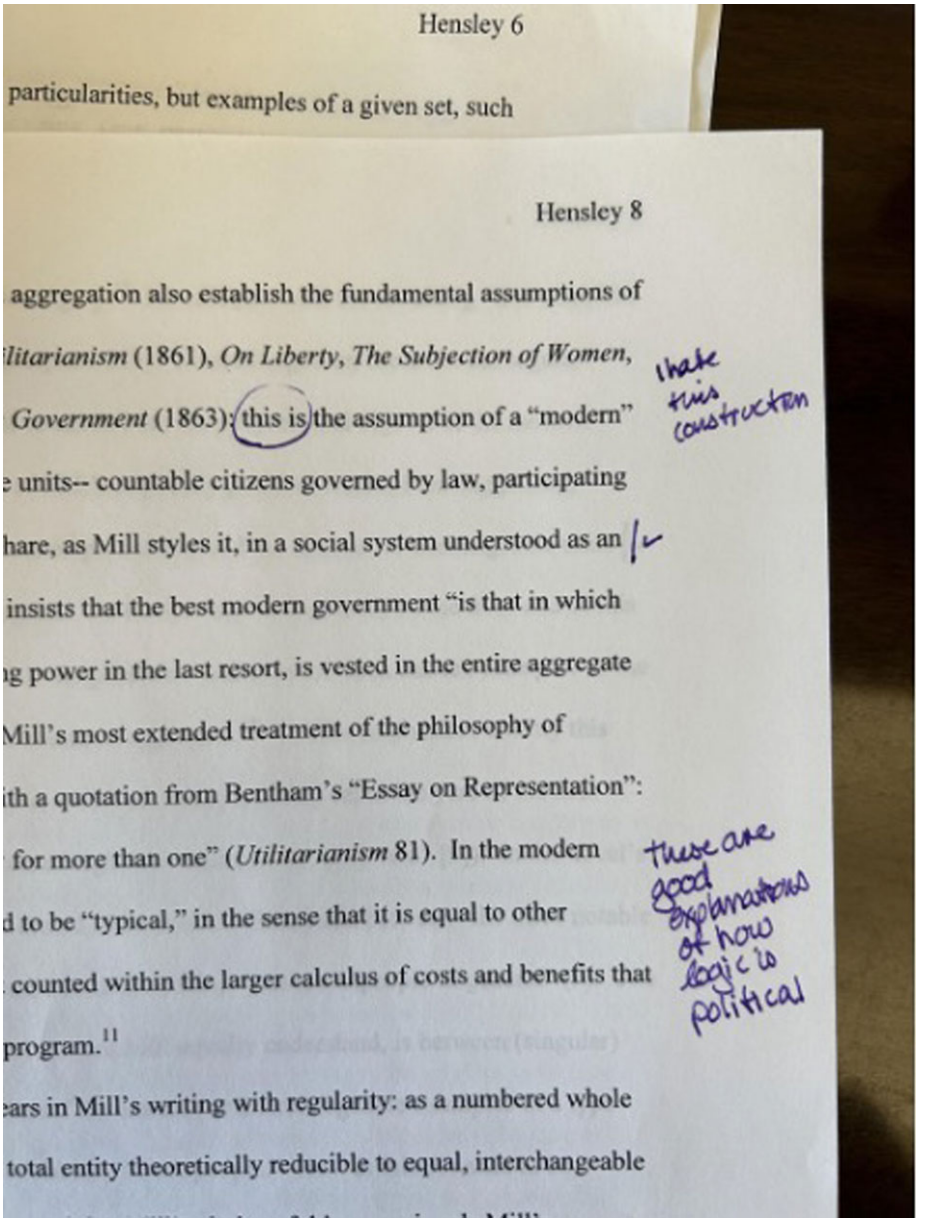


Figure 6. Kathy Psomiades's essay annotations, c. 2008, detail: "I hate this construction" and "these are good explanations of how logic is political."

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Notes

1. Jay, *Genesis and Validity*, 1.
2. Jay, *Genesis and Validity*, 1.
3. Psomiades, *Primitive Marriage*, 19. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
4. See also Psomiades, *Primitive Marriage*, 59n13, 82, 105.
5. Hensley, Course notes.
6. Qtd. in Jay, *Genesis and Validity*, 5.

Works Cited

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Jay, Martin. *Genesis and Validity: The Theory and Practice of Intellectual History*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press: 2022.

Psomiades, Kathy Alexis. *Primitive Marriage: Victorian Anthropology and the Novel*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2023.

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