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Review of *Unnatural Affections: Women and Fiction in the Later 18th Century* by George Haggerty, and *Empowering the Feminine: The Narratives of Mary Robinson, Jane West, and Amelia Opie, 1796-1812* by Eleanor Ty

Diane Hoeveler

Marquette University, diane.hoeveler@marquette.edu

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Empowering the Feminine: The Narratives of Mary Robinson, Jane West, and Amelia Opie, 1796-1812. By Eleanor Ty. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. x + 220 pages.

Unnatural Affections: Women and Fiction in the Later 18th Century. By George Haggerty. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998.

Diane Long Hoeveler

These two studies give literary critics yet two more books in the growing bibliography of works on both marginalized and mainstream British women writers from the late eighteenth through the early nineteenth centuries. Empowering the Feminine focuses on three novels apiece by Mary Robinson, Jane West, and Amelia Opie, while Unnatural Affections concentrates on a veritable cornucopia: the novels of Sarah Fielding, Elizabeth Inchbald, Charlotte Smith, Sophia Lee, Clara Reeve, Jane Austen, Sarah Scott, Mary Wollstonecraft, Charlotte Lennox, Fanny Burney, Ann Radcliffe, Charlotte Dacre, and Mary Ann Radcliffe. Empowering the Feminine is straightforward in its organization and rather modest in its claims. The same, unfortunately, cannot be said about Unnatural Affections. What distinguishes these two works and why they make such a timely comparison at this particular historical juncture is their use of very different critical methodologies. Although both books are examining ostensibly the same subject--middle-class women writers from the same historical period and milieu--they do so in radically different modes and intentions.

Empowering the Feminine is Ty's second study in which she seeks to bring long overdue attention to largely forgotten British women writers of the late eighteenth century. By my count, only three of the nine novels she discusses are currently in print. The others--as I know from experience--have to be copied page by page from microfilm. With the advent of Broadview Press in Ontario, a press committed to publishing long out of print women's novels, several of these titles

should eventually become available. That problem aside, Ty performs a valuable scholarly service in bringing to our attention the most important novels of each of these writers: Robinson's autobiographical Memoirs (in print) alongside her Walsingham, The False Friend, and The Natural Daughter; West's A Gossip's Story, A Tale of the Times, and The Infidel Father; and Opie's The Father and Daughter, Adeline Mowbray, and Temper.

Ty's stated focus is literary depictions of "empowerment" for female characters as well as women authors, none of whom wanted to be seen as "breaking with cultural definitions of the feminine" (vii). Such a notion--which I label "passive aggression" in my Gothic Feminism (1998)--is obvious in women's fiction. The more interesting and problematic issue is how to talk about "empowerment" through pretended weakness in a theoretical way that is both grounded in the historical background of the period and at the same time is informed by current psychoanalytic attempts to understand female psychology. Ty sets the historical stage by beginning her book with an Introduction that focuses on "the turbulent legacy of Mary Wollstonecraft," "the fascination with female bodies, female suffering, and fallen women," and "radicalism at the turn of the century." Wollstonecraft's writings--particularly her polemical pieces--were blatantly concerned with issues affecting the empowerment of women, but the backlash that set in after Godwin's publication of the Memoirs (1798) caused women with liberal sympathies to distance themselves from Wollstonecraft's politics (or her personal life). In making her case, Ty would like to believe that the scapegoating of Wollstonecraft caused the increasing conservatism of the women writers examined here. But the dates on Robinson simply do not bear this out. Robinson had virtually stopped writing fiction by 1798 and was dead by 1801. Opie wrote her major novel--Adeline Mowbray--as a critique of Godwin and Wollstonecraft's ideas, and West's works stand in a different (radically Methodist) universe altogether. In other words, Wollstonecraft does not fully signify as explaining

the themes and concerns of these novels, nor is she relevant here except as one voice among many--Burke, Rousseau, Helvetius, Paine, Holcroft, etc--in a complex and often contradictory historical period.

As for her use of psychoanalytical paradigms to shed light on the persistent patterns of self-abuse, victimization, masochism, and cross-dressing, Ty resorts largely to Kristeva's theory of abjection and Lacan's theory of differance. Both of these approaches are too familiar to literary critics to need rehearsing here, and they are, unfortunately, too familiar to be used in a book that needs something else--something more--to explain these patterns. When women writers repeatedly use the three stock fantasy-formations--either seduction, castration, or repetitions of the primal scene--then we know we are actually dealing in the realms of trauma--physical or sexual abuse and abandonment or betrayal. The most recent attempts to explain the psychoanalytical concerns of women's literature are currently focusing on interrelating theories of trauma and fantasy. And theories of trauma repeatedly have shown that trauma is not simply personal or individual, but always also culturally and historically grounded. The trauma of being female in late eighteenth-century Britain translates as the trauma of sanctioned sexual exploitation (Robinson), the trauma of economic displacement and abandonment by the patriarchy (West), and the trauma of betrayal or disappointment in the mother/imagined matriarchy (Opie). The literary responses to each of these traumas are fantasy-formations that allow the authors and their surrogate characters a fictitious mastery over their real or perceived abuses.

Ty's basic thesis describes three ways by which Robinson, West, and Opie sought to empower the feminine in their fictions: "they rewrote the codes of masculinity and femininity; they attempted to invest more dignity to those tasks that were customarily viewed as female ones; or else

they questioned the way women were traditionally represented in literature, in religious and popular texts" (7). No disagreeing with this statement, but as a thesis it does not open up these works for original or innovative or risky analysis. It leads instead to considerable plot summary with familiar critics cited as support. Although the book is not as thought-provoking or widely researched as one might like, it does discuss nine literary works that deserve to be read and taught, rather than ignored or relegated to footnotes about obscure female literary figures and their quaint titles.

I want to begin, however, with Ty's analysis of Robinson's life as presented in her Memoirs (1801) and her three major novels. Robinson is an interesting figure who has recently begun to garner attention for her poetry and her treatise, Thoughts on the Condition of Women, and on the Injustice of Mental Subordination (1799). Her novels--all but one out of print--have received scant attention, so Ty's discussion here is welcome as a beginning of what will, I suspect, be a growing discourse on this author. Relying heavily on other critics, Ty does conclude in her own voice: "Robinson's memoirs, essay, and novels show how women were not simply duped by patriarchal ideals or masculine representations, but also seduced into different culturally sanctioned gender positions" (35). In her discussion of Walsingham (1797), Ty attempts to link Robinson's crossdressed heroine--"Sir Sidney Aubrey"--with Judith Butler's theory of "performativity of gender" (43). But before that connection can be explored, Ty is on to Foucault, Marjorie Garber, and others. My point here is that a sustained critical and theoretical focus is not maintained at any time in the book. Much research has been expended gathering a paragraph of Foucault here, a paragraph of Kristeva or Cixous there. If all of these critical snippets advanced an original thesis of Ty's, we would have a valuable study. But, as noted above, when Ty speaks in her voice, the observations do not move much beyond what we all know already.

The chapter on The False Friend (1799) provides the most interesting discussion in the Robinson section. Along with her Hubert de Sevrac (1796), it reveals how much Robinson was influenced by gothic conventions. Replete with the stock topoi of gothic props--incest, abduction, forced marriage, and prisons--Robinson appears to be criticizing "a system wherein females are taught to place all their hopes upon unfaithful or false men" (61). In other words, Robinson never gets at what we would label the base of the patriarchal structure of corruption; she is instead content to engage in portraits of female victims, pawns, or dupes who think that they need their "false friends"--men--and actually appear to love them the way the oppressed often love their oppressors (masochistically, passive-aggressively). As Ty points out about Robinson's complicity in and actual longing for an idealized patriarchal system: Robinson "does not wish to overturn the premises of the patriarchal system; she only chastises those who do not follow its chivalric codes" (61). This is a stinging indictment of Robinson's novelistic visions and it places her, not on the side of Wollstonecraft (which is where Ty wants her to be), but on the side of nostalgic political and social reactionaries like Edmund Burke and Richard Hurd. But again the observation is not followed up by exposing the conservatism just below the surface of Robinson's novel. It is instead glossed over to bring in Teresa de Lauretis on violence against women as a means of social control (65) and David Spurr on the "rhetoric of affirmation in colonial discourse" (66). The center of Ty's interpretation cannot hold when her own observations are continually undercut by the often tangential theories of others.

In her three discussions of Jane West's novels, Ty admits that West "attempted to instill lessons of restraint, Christian fortitude, and obedience by 'fascinat[ing] the imagination' of her readers whose 'energies' she wished to rouse" (102). In The Gossip's Story (1796) the mother is

effaced in favor of embracing the father, and yet Ty wants to argue that in focusing the story on the errant (passionate) sister West is actually subverting her ostensible conservative moral (94). She attempts the same sort of sleight of hand in her discussion of A Tale of the Times (1799). Here she argues that "woman, or more particularly, a mother, represents all of the most sacred and most cherished virtues of the nation, but could also become the means by which that nation falls" (115). This thesis, which several others--all quoted here--have taken with regard to West is somehow portrayed by Ty as a potentially subversive position. But how can it be? Either way--whether as "virgin mother" or "whore"--women are objectified and positioned for the public or private male gaze. One mother's seduction does not bring down Britain, much as West would like to present a domestic moral that can also be read as a political allegory. And the opposite is also true. If every mother in Britain remains chaste and monogamous, Britain will not be saved from an attempted French invasion. The logic operating here is fantasy, not sustained political thought. Finally, in her discussion of The Infidel Father (1802) West admits that the novel is a straight-forward anti-jacobin piece of didacticism, this time noting that the targets of the sustained critique are the educational theories of Rousseau and Godwin and their pernicious effects when applied to a young aristocratic woman raised by a treacherous and misguided aristocratic father. But what is one to make of the fact that Rousseau's theories of education had come in for severe criticism earlier by Eliza Fenwick in Secresy (1795), and that Fenwick was herself an ally of Godwin and later nursed Mary Godwin as a baby after Wollstonecraft's death? What is missing in this chapter is a nuanced discussion of an extremely complicated and shifting the political system of alliances existing not simply among the Jacobins, but also among the anti-jacobins. Ty's conclusion to this chapter, however, is suggestive for where the section could have spent its energy: "West associates the

rebellious female with the hysterical, abnormal, and diseased body. The unchaste woman becomes the madwoman, a spectacle loose in the public sphere" (129). This is a very promising and interesting observation, but, unfortunately, not developed.

In the final author considered here, Amelia Opie, Ty offers some of her best readings. The Father and Daughter (1801) was so popular, Ty informs us, that it was adapted as an Italian opera in 1809, a play by Mrs. Kemble in 1815, and a novel by Thomas Moncrieff called The Lear of Private Life (135). The novel's success came from the fact that it "offered readers the chance to mourn the loss of a world of simplicity and order, the pre-revolutionary world that, according to Edmund Burke, depended upon 'the spirit of a gentleman, and the spirit of religion'" (135). Working in the "seduced maiden" tradition, the novel traces a woman's melodramatic reunion with her now-insane father, and the recognition and forgiveness scene that kills them both. In her discussion of Adeline Mowbray (1804), Opie's most successful and well-known novel, Ty presents the most useful reading of the novel's complexities that I have read. Generally seen as a tract condemning Jacobin free-thinking and free-love, Adeline Mowbray has also been seen as actually expressing "contradictory and, possibly, revolutionary messages" (145). This late-twentieth-century need to see the past as actually expousing (in hidden or effaced terms) our own values is indeed unfortunate. Anyone who has read Adeline Mowbray knows that the novel is not sympathetic to any of the characters except the two mother-substitutes, Rachel, a Quaker woman (and Opie was to convert to Quakerism later in her life) and Savanna, a mulatto servant woman. In fact, Adeline dies on Savanna's breast, not in her mother's arms. But if this is her species of liberalism--Quakerism mixed with Jamaican common-sense--Opie was not exactly hiding a Jacobin message that we can now read as proto-feminism. However, in this section Ty does offer several valuable and original

observations about the novel's imagery patterns. In her final section, Ty discusses Temper (1812), an example of a late work that appears to be completely didactic in function. Again, Ty wants to see it as something else: it exhibits "interesting tensions between female desire and social constraint, between authority and transgression; and [it] reveal[s] the difficulties women have with their mothers" (161-62). In a story that focuses on three generations of women, the novella suggests that happy endings for women will take not one but three generations to unfold if those women do not cultivate the most crucial virtues: "good-humour," "self-sacrifice," "generosity," and, of course, control over one's temper: "Temper is the catch-all phrase to mean patience, resignation, endurance, even piety, especially for a woman" (176-77).

Ty states in her concluding chapter that these authors' "attempts to empower women as subjects are not the same as the efforts of liberal feminists today. They were not agitating for political votes, equity in the labour force, or control of fertility and reproduction" (179). Instead, these three women writers win praise for challenging limited views of women as weak, redefining the role of the maternal, and rethinking what was supposedly "natural" to women. Ty goes on to admit, "at times, their views seem inconsistent or contradictory because they were still working out the details of how women could lead rich and rewarding lives and still subscribe to the culture's prescriptions of the proper lady" (179). I believe that these statements set up false dichotomies. I am not aware that anyone is agitating for the vote today, nor would I expect a woman writing in the late eighteenth century to do so to meet my approval. "Feminism" as we now know it was not a defined concept, even in Wollstonecraft's writings. Why bring it into a discussion, unless one is somehow trying to apologize for women writers who simply lived in a different historical time? And to say that their views are "contradictory" implies that ours somehow are not. We cannot see

them clearly any more than they could see us. Ty's book is valuable for simply adding one more piece to the large puzzle we call "British society, 1790-1815." But all literary works will be better pieces when we as critics can refrain from projecting ourselves onto the board.

Lest I seem unduly harsh, let me now move to an examination of Haggerty's Unnatural Affections, a book that openly brags about "teasing out the 'queer' possibilities of these texts" (177).

If we are uncertain exactly what he means by that, Haggerty goes on to define: "What is queer about these works is their refusal to conform to heteronormative expectation as well as their sheer inventiveness of imagined alternatives....romantic friends, effeminized male partners, devoted sisterly affection, mother-daughter bonds, maimed and disfigured heroines, bleeding heroes, abject paternal obsession, and last, but by no means least, lesbian couples" (177-78). One of these supposed "lesbian couples" is no less than the sisters Marianne and Elinor in Austen's Sense and Sensibility, but before you guffaw, let me begin at the beginning of this apologia for the "queer" in British women's fiction.

Haggerty's first chapter focuses on Sarah Fielding's David Simple (1744), a novel that concerns a brother and sister accused of incest, the first of several "unnatural affections" that Haggerty wants to celebrate: "The central characters in David Simple live, as it were, outside of law. They are certainly outside of convention. And it is their unwillingness to conform that makes them threatening to society. Those of us who are queer might want to claim them for our own" (30). This sort of personal identification with literary characters seems to me to be folly. As I suggested above, it is well nigh impossible to ever see clearly a distant historical period because of our removal in time and space, as well as our own subscription to ideologies that blind us to ever fully appreciating those of another age. As literary critics we are always looking into a "glass

darkly," trying to make out the shadowy shapes, but that glass quickly becomes even more distorted if we have positioned ourselves squarely in front of the mirror. Then what we see can only be distorted images of ourselves, writ large or queer or whatever in the fiction. Such, I am afraid, is what Haggerty has done. He is intent on projecting his own sense of "unnaturalness" onto every woman writer he treats here. And--never fear--he does not let the facts get in the way of his pursuit of "queerness."

As his discussion of the incest theme in David Simple reveals, Haggerty is keen to read characters who reject the prohibition on incest as rebels with a cause: Camilla and Valentine are heroic because they refuse to "participate unthinkingly in the mechanisms of patriarchy" (31). The prohibition on incest in this reading is just a silly old convention, unfairly labeled "unnatural," just as, by extension, homosexuality has been. Haggerty wants to argue that incestuous desire is "natural" and has been "perverted in a culture that functions on the level of the symbolic: natural desires will always be coded as unnatural when they challenge culture at its very roots" (36).

In his discussion of Sense and Sensibility Haggerty returns to the incest theme with yet an even more bizarre argument: Marianne is saved from a life devoted to masturbation (the same proclivity he claims is stalking Arabella in Lennox's The Female Quixote) through her sister's incestuous passion for her. As Haggerty notes, "the novel masks female-female desire in the configuration of family life because that is the only place that it can flourish unmolested. Sisterly love shimmers with a devotion that exists nowhere else in this work. It promises that the family can be source of sustenance after all" (87). Now if I am reading clearly here, this statement implies that incestuous lesbianism is the only positive value to be found in the patriarchal family. This is yet another version of the reading proffered for David Simple, when we heard that the only way of

asserting one's rebellion against the oppressive patriarchal system was to have an affair with your sibling. Why would anyone trying to make a sympathetic case for "queerness" in literary texts want to align it with incest as some sort of heroic act?

Incestuous lesbianism can also, according to Haggerty, be found in Sophia Lee's The Recess, a novel about two fictitious daughters of Mary Queen of Scots, both of whom are married (to men, like the sisters in Sense and Sensibility). This conventional act is again explained away by Haggerty (as he says, men "are the source of bitterness and self-disgust" to women [87]) and he blithely goes on to claim that The Recess "celebrates women-centered affection and eroticizes maternal relations with unswerving flair. If this is not a feminotopia . . . it does at least create the fantasy of a lost world of female-female desire" (69). But notice how many slippages in logic there are in his argument about this text: "History, as it were, finds its source in a secret female space that retains its magic power throughout the novel. This subterranean world, associated as it is with the sisters and their dreams, becomes equivalent in the novel to female desire itself. Lee dramatizes that desire and feminizes it; real female desire, she seems to say, finds its object in the female" (70). So something that is not there (the mother) is the source of "magic power" (which is also not there) so that the sisters can desire each other (also not there). To invoke a string of negatives leading to some sort of positive desire seems specious to say the least.

But the incest leitmotif is not the only recurring "unnatural affection" in this book. Same-sex desire between women dominates Millenium Hall according to Haggerty: "I call Millenium Hall a lesbian narrative because it insists on intimate relations between . . . women as an alternative to the male-centered experience of marriage" (102). But there are no "intimate relations between women" in the novel, unless one sees talking to each other and visiting the neighboring poor to be

"lesbian" acts. But lest we think Scott's novel rare in its presentation of "lesbian narrative," there are always the works of Wollstonecraft, a woman not exactly known for indifference to the men in her life. Same-sex desire is also operative, according to Haggerty, in Wollstonecraft's fictions: "It may not seem that Wollstonecraft is as clearly or directly advocating same-sex relations as Scott--but I would argue that not only does she argue for such relations, she laments that they are not accorded more significance in culture itself" (114). This sort of argument--you do not see it but the critic insists it is there--seems to be a type of wish-fulfillment and self-projection. Because Haggerty wants to see lesbian passion between Mary and Ann or Maria and Jemima, then he sees it and tells you over and over again that it is there. Don't you see it? Are you blind? Again we are back to literary criticism as a manifestation of the funhouse mirror in which we can only see shadowy shapes of ourselves, our own wishes and desires.

The final "unnatural" affection in this study is heterosexual love between a male and a female character, Adeline and Theodore in The Romance of the Forest: "they are not the heteroerotic poster couple that most critics would like to make them. If I call them queer, it is not merely to be provocative" (161). So how can these heterosexual characters be "queer"? After much citing of a variety of critics, Haggerty concludes that Adeline falls in love with Theodore because she sees him as a version of herself, a suffering, victimized woman: "To the degree, that is, that Theodore becomes like a woman, he is attractive to the heroine....Adeline's vividly sadistic abuse of Theodore in her imagination [her dreams of her dead father] projects lack onto the male body and eroticizes the possibility of nonphallic sexuality" (169). So this is yet another implausible position taken by those committed to imposing queer theory on uncongenial texts. Male literary characters are not really to be read as male; they are actually female. Certainly psychoanalytic

critics are familiar with substitution-formations, but for such a practice to have any validity, there has to be a connection between the two objects. If I said that a female ghost can be read as a substitute for the dead mother, no one would think that such a connection was totally implausible. But if I said that a handsome young man was actually a beautiful young woman and should be read in the text that way, who would accept such a substitution? And why would they be willing to do so? Only because they have a vested interest in wanting to believe in the possibility of such a substitution. Only, in short, because they are looking into a very dark mirror.

On a more mundane level, I had to wonder why the paperback edition of Unnatural Affections had 16 blank pages rather than text. I do not think I have ever seen this sort of oversight in any book, let alone a university press book. In order to read the full paperback edition, one is forced to find the hardcover, photocopy the missing pages, and then affix them one by one. One is tempted to conclude that only a book reviewer would subject herself to that much effort.

In conclusion, these two books will be added to our bibliographies and the dates of their publications--the late 1990s--will be remembered as the heyday of "feminist" approaches to literature or the use of "queer theory" to analyze texts. Feminist theory has already passed through three distinct phases (as outlined by Elaine Showalter) and it will, I would predict, go through at least three more before it arrives at a way of analyzing texts without imposing on them our own particular historically-bound biases. Queer theory will also, I hope, become more careful in its analyses and move past the need to see every writer from the past as in a closet that needs airing. Both of these works--I would predict--are fairly early examples of how we will later come to understand both critical approaches. Each has some astute moments and genuinely important insights to make; however, each is marred by a personal investment in a methodology that produces

a lack of critical and theoretical control.

Diane Long Hoeveler

Marquette University

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Note on Contributor

Diane Long Hoeveler is Professor of English and Coordinator of the Women's Studies Program at Marquette University. She is author of Gothic Feminism: The Professionalization of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontes (1998) and Romantic Androgyny: The Women Within (1990). She has also coauthored Charlotte Bronte (1996) and coedited Approaches to Teaching 'Jane Eyre' (1993). A specialist in women's, romantic, and gothic literatures, she is currently writing "Sentimental Politics: Domesticating the Revolution in Romantic Women's Fiction."