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Review of *Misreading 'Jane Eyre': A Postformalist Paradigm* by Jerome Beaty

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poetics where Venus is depicted as the mother of Middle English poetry, while Cupid assumes the same role in medieval French verse. Further, Venus becomes a sign of poetics focused on sensual pleasure, as in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*, and Cupid becomes the model of a rejected courtly lover, as in Thomas Hoccleve's *Letter of Cupid*.

In addition to the abundant wealth of ideas posited and works discussed, the volume includes a thorough note section, bibliography, and index. Theresa Tinkle has thus provided a necessary study which should heighten scholars' perceptions of Venus and Cupid as they appear in Middle English works. This handsome work provides impetus for further thought concerning these two deities as they appear throughout the Middle English canon and should become a major component of Medieval literary criticism.

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❖ *Misreading 'Jane Eyre': A Postformalist Paradigm*. By Jerome Beaty. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1996. xvi + 259 pp. \$35.00.

Jerome Beaty's interesting new book places Bronte's *Jane Eyre* within what he calls a "postformalist paradigm." By that term he means the reader-response theories of M.M. Bakhtin, Wolfgang Iser, and Meir Sternberg as informed by an examination of the historical genres and literary texts that were current at the time Bronte herself was writing. A great deal of research, both in contemporary literary theory and historical sources, has gone into this book, which at several points claims that Bronte's novel was a "new species of novel" (24) and a "horizon-changing novel" (220). But by the time he concludes, Beaty's position is actually quite conservative and traditional. He argues that when we accurately place Bronte's novel within the largest possible historical, critical, and literary frameworks, the work has to be understood primarily as "a providential novel" (215)—a position that feminist and Marxist critics have been quite successfully complicating and problematizing for over thirty years.

But first to the organization of this book. Beginning with a brief chapter "On Postformalism," Beaty states that he intends to rely on the relevant theories of Meir Sternberg, who demonstrates what he calls the "primacy" effect, or "how the temporal position of the early portions of a text powerfully programs the reading of that text and how other strategies can modify or subvert this influence" (xi). Beaty also employs Iser's claim that any "work" of literature is "virtual, situated somewhere between [the text and the subjectivity of the reader]" (xii). Finally, Beaty summarizes some of the theories of Bakhtin/Medvedev to examine the social, political, and

philosophical ideogemes found in the genres of domestic realism and its novelistic competition, the gothic romance. Beaty usefully sets these two genres against each other in a “dialogic relationship” (xiv) that he examines as a “clash of novel species. . . dialogically related to the contextual struggle of cultural and social forces” (xv).

This initial critical survey is then usefully applied by Beaty to the next four chapters, all grouped under the heading of “Part I: Intertextualities.” I found the discussions in these four chapters—the exploration of “the kinds of plot and epistemological expectations which that generic signal engendered, expectations soon strategically complicated by other generic signals” (3)—to be the most interesting section of the book. In the first chapter Beaty surveys the genre of fictional autobiography, specifically as it was developed by William Godwin (*Caleb Williams*, *St. Leon*, and *Fleetwood*), Bulwer Lytton (*Pelham*, *The Disowned*, and *Devereux*), and Benjamin Disraeli (*Contarini Fleming*). This chapter also focuses on what Beaty calls the “scenic topoi” of the confined, victimized, and abused child in the Byronic novel, sentimental novels, foundling novels (like Dickens’s *Oliver Twist*), moral didactic tales like Barbara Hofland’s *Ellen, the Teacher: A Tale for Youth* (1814), and governess novels like Mrs. Sherwood’s *Caroline Mordaunt* (1835).

In the second chapter Beaty examines the conventions of the school setting, the child-death and the “deserted wing” of the mansion in other texts of the period, specifically Dickens’s *Nicholas Nickleby*, Rachel McCrindell’s *The English Governess*, and Elizabeth Sewell’s *Amy Herbert*. Beaty’s conclusion to this chapter bears repeating: “Bronte subsumes disparate Romantic traditions and transforms them, creating a new species, the Victorian novel, but the overdetermination of the scenic topoi even within a familiar frame makes that new original-traditional novel apparently univocal but ultimately dialogic” (43).

In the third chapter Beaty places many of the governess novels he has previously examined in juxtaposition with the gothic genre. Of particular interest is his discussion of Clara Reeves’ *Fatherless Fanny* (1819), H.F. Chorley’s “Parson Clare,” in his *Sketches of a Seaport Town* (1834), and Sheridan LeFanu’s *A Chapter in the History of a Tyrone Family* (1839), all of which employ the “taxonomy of clandestinely incarcerated wives” (74).

And finally in the fourth chapter Beaty examines motifs of passionate love and outbursts of fire (metaphorical and literal) in a number of novels: Geraldine Jewsbury’s *Zoe, Margaret Russell: An Autobiography* (1846), and Mary Hays’s *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796). This chapter also examines what Beaty calls “intratextual devices or strategies” like the ignis fatuus (false lead), permanent or temporary gaps in the narrative, implications (true or false) by juxtaposition, the function of volume endings, and doublevoicedness or hybridization (6-7).

The central issue that emerges as one reads all of the very interesting parallels (or “refractions,” to use the Bakhtinian term) between novels written before *Jane Eyre* and these largely lesser-known texts, which could have provided some species of influence, is the rather prosaic one that occurs to most scholars: did Bronte actually read the earlier text and did she record or discuss that fact in a letter? Beaty sidesteps this issue more than once, claiming “Awareness of the conventions or topoi may also prevent facile literary-historical conclusions that a resemblance between this in *Jane Eyre* and that in Novel X must indicate that X was a ‘source’ of or an ‘influence’ on Bronte’s novel” (4). At a later point Beaty states, “And in considering literary history and the interrelation of texts, it is important to recognize that the source, the authorization of ‘narratibility,’ is the convention, not necessarily the particular scene or situation in some other single work or author” (42). In other words, Beaty cannot prove that Bronte actually read all or any of the texts he discusses.

The second section of the book, “Part II: Strategies of the Text,” allows Beaty to actually proffer his critical reading of the text, and this he does under the topics “Hybridization: The Three Voices of Jane,” “Devastation and Revisitations: A Cold, Solitary Girl Again,” “Ideology and the Act of Reading: The Cold Cumbrous Column,” “Decentering the Narrator: St. John’s Way,” and “Decentering the Author: Charlotte Bronte’s misreading of *Jane Eyre*.” These later chapters alternate between fairly ordinary plot summary and very heavy “fieldspeak.” A typical example: “Perhaps the narratigeme of the scenic topois may suggest a concrete way to demonstrate the multispeached, multispecied *Jane Eyre*’s concrete unity” (221). As already noted, this heavy critical apparatus is finally employed to inform us that *Jane Eyre* can be best understood as exhibiting a “providentialist ontology” offering “a meaningful *statement* of reconciliation to God and society” (217). For someone who has shown us just how complexly the narrative has been woven together and from how many disparate threads, such a conclusion seems strained at best.

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❖ *Dearest Chums and Partners: Joel Chandler Harris’s Letters to His Children: A Domestic Biography*. Edited by Hugh T. Keenan. Foreword by R. Bruce Bickley, Jr. Athens: University of Georgia Press. 1993. 531 pp. \$40.00.

Joel Chandler Harris knew that his letters to his children were unusual. In a letter to his daughters, living away from home at a Catholic boarding school, he wrote, “I daresay the good sisters wonder why I don’t write you