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Women and Novelistic Authority

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WOMEN AND NOVELISTIC AUTHORITY JOSEPHINE DONOVAN. *Women and the Rise of the Novel, 1405-1726*. New York: [St. Martin's Press](#), 2000. \$18.95 paper. xiii + 176pp.

CAROLINE A. JEWERS. *Chivalric Fiction and the History of the Novel*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000. \$49.95 cloth, xii + 240 pp.

LINDA LANG-PERALTA, ED. *Women, Revolution, and the Novels of the 1790s*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1999. \$21.95. paper, xv + 230 pp.

It has been academic sport for some decades now to debate the convoluted and complex origins of the novel. The most well known analyses have been based on changing class structure and increased rates of literacy (Watt, Williams, Lukács, McKeon, et al.), but more recently gender has entered the critical terrain as an explanatory category (Spencer, Spender, Richetti, Doody, et al.), and the works under review here illustrate facets of that development. By placing these three recent titles in juxtaposition, one can see that the question of the origins and significance of the novel as a genre—and specifically the role that women have played in the development of the novel—is still a contested topic and one that will continue to determine the shape of literary studies for the next several years. To elaborate that observation, a reading of these titles forces their reader to ask: will literary critics continue to excavate little known novels by obscure and forgotten female writers in order to question the easy assumptions that have determined our study of the history of the novel?

In other words, as in so many areas of the literary canon, will we continue to ask and answer what difference gender makes? And, further, how has gender inextricably been interwoven with nationalism, class structures and privileges in order to create what we still call "women's literature"? Can the history of the novel be rewritten so that women writers are given their proper status even though, for the most part, women produced works that have been largely denigrated or buried by historians of the novel? But these questions beg the larger issue, which is: can literary critics ever recreate through their own scholarship an accurate and "thick" historical context in order to understand the production, dissemination, and consumption of novels? Or is any such attempt a bit like the blind man trying to describe an elephant through touch? And can we ever objectively judge "aesthetic" works apart from the prejudices of our own educations that, of course, replicate the gender, class, and nationalistic categories in which we were instructed? Each of these three studies attempts to answer some of the smaller questions that operate within the large question: how and why did the novel evolve as it did? As no one study can answer this query, these works each in their own way attempt to be one piece of a very large puzzle spread in many different directions and across many disparate times and countries.

To begin, Jewers's book situates the origins of the novel before Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, arguing that the genre actually began in the medieval romance as developed by Chrétien de Troyes' *Chevalier de la Charette*, continuing through the Occitan romances (specifically the *Roman de Flamenca* [c. 1225-50] and *Jaufre* [c. 1225]), and then to *Tirant lo Blanch* (1490) by the Catalans Joanot Martorell and Martí Joan de Galba. As Jewers states in her Preface, "Rather than viewing the novel as reacting against the romance, this study argues that the romance reacted to its own conventions in important ways that contribute directly and in an integrated way to the development of the genre—and therefore to the history of the novel" (xi).

Jewers's methodology assumes transcultural and transnational influences, and in particular she shows how the early history of the novel cannot be understood apart from its immersion within the French, Occitan, Spanish, and Catalan vernacular traditions. The emphasis of her study, besides tracing the continuities between the medieval romance and the later secular novel, lies in her focus on the parodie, self-conscious pose of the narrator, a stance that we would call postmodern or self-reflexive today: "Parody...generates a sense of narrative dynamism and a comic reflexivity that agitates for change within convention, bringing a constant sense of renewal. The romance's greatest quest is ultimately its search for itself, and a fearless-sometimes comicstriving for a center and for meaning makes it a part of the novel's illustrious genealogy" (xii). This is an interesting thesis, and one that Jewers develops in each of the four supporting chapters, but it finally fails to convince. The problem lies in trying to transplant and impose contemporary critical standards onto medieval works that shared a very different ethos-not, I think, an ethos steeped in postmodern playfulness. Does anyone honestly think that medieval writers and their audiences had no certain sense of a "center"? Just because we question theistic conceptions of the universe does not mean that they were being "comically" challenged in 1100.

Apart from her annoyingly postmodern stance, Jewers's book is well researched, clearly written, and an important contribution to the history of the novel. Her first chapter, "Rekindling the Romance: Toward and Away from the Prehistory of the Novel," is one of the most useful summaries of the theories and approaches that have been taken to the "prehistory" of the genre. This chapter surveys the relevant writings on the history of both medievalism and the novel by such theorists as Milan Kundera, Georg Lukács, Erich Auerbach, Ian Watt, Hubert McDermott, Mikhail Bakhtin, Cesare Segre, just to mention the most prominent. Donovan differs from those critics who see the medieval romance as a "branchline of interest" rather than part of "a continuous thread of literary development" (25), and she relies on Bakhtin's observation to establish her own position on the importance of parody as the characteristic that links the two seemingly incongruous and historically disparate genres. For Bakhtin, "The novel parodies other genres (precisely in their roles as genres); it exposes the conventionality of their forms and their language; it squeezes out some genres and incorporates others into its own peculiar structure, reformulating and re-accentuating them" (Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel," qtd. in Jewers 25-26). The leap that Jewers then makes is revealing: "It becomes increasingly clear that the history of the romance is caught up in a self-critical movement toward parody, and this aspect of its generic evolution has been too long overlooked" (26). But how is that "increasingly clear"? If, as Bakhtin implies, the novel parodies the medieval romance, then how is the medieval romance a parody, and of what? The medieval romance is not a novel, and so her argument proceeds from a faulty correlation between two related but not identical genres.

I find myself quibbling again. This is a strong study that takes the sorts of chances that any scholarly study has to take if any progress is to be made in pushing the boundaries of our understanding. The supporting chapters cover a good deal of material related to the texts under analysis, and the discussions themselves are valuable contributions to the field. But, finally, my most serious quibble with Jewers is that she is gender blind when it comes to the history of the medieval romance. For her, women were not central figures in the production, dissemination, and consumption of romances; instead, they were archetypal or allegorical figures. There is a very brief mention of Marie de France, but nothing of Christine de Pizan, a central figure in Josephine Donovan's history of the novel. And so, somewhat ironically, arguing for the inclusion

of a neglected genre in the larger history of the novel would seem to produce a certain blind spot in regard to the role that women played in the development of the novel.

Josephine Donovan tells, then, a somewhat different story in her book, which traces the role of women in the rise of the novel, 1405-1726:

My thesis in this study is that while women have long been identified-both as writers and as readers-with the sentimentalist tradition, their contribution to the rise of the realist novel has not yet been recognized. That contribution included the development of a critical irony that was rooted in women's marginalized standpoint and resistant to dominant misogynistic ideologies, and the articulation of a kind of feminist casuistry wherein case studies of women's circumstances, realistically conveyed, were used to refute misogynist generalities and maxims. (12)

Where *Jewers* focuses on parody as the key to the transformation of romance into novel, Donovan emphasizes irony and casuistry, one a modern pose and one a decidedly medieval tactic. Although I fail to sense irony as we understand the term operating in much early women's writings, I would admit that there is a good deal of casuistry (and working for Jesuits has made me particularly sensitive to this phenomenon). But using one device of the Church Fathers does not necessarily make women's literature part of the narrative mainstream. I would see it more as an aping device, an attempt to ventriloquize the voices of the dominant male establishment in order to undermine their positions (passive-aggression, so to speak).

Admittedly, Donovan focuses primarily on a later period than does *Jewers*, although she also begins where *Jewers* did, namely with the Italian, French, and Spanish origins of the genre (Christine de Pizan, Jeanne Flore, Madame d'Aulnoy, Marguerite de Navarre, and Maria de Zayas y Sotomayor). She goes on to situate her study clearly in Great Britain by examining the works of Jane Barker, Margaret Cavendish, Mary Astell, Delarivier Manley, Mary Davys, Aphra Behn, Sarah Fielding, Charlotte Lennox, and assorted others. Obviously, any work that covers this much ground is bound to be less developed on any one figure or literary work than the specialist might like, but the sheer amount of material covered and the sweep of the argument make this, in my opinion, a very useful book for graduate courses on the history of early women's literature.

As for critical methodologies, Donovan also relies on contemporary theories, specifically, standpoint epistemology as well as the theories of Bakhtin and Iris Murdoch, both of whom are relied upon to characterize the novel as an ethical ("casuistical") case study. She also has developed enough of a body of her own critical approaches to the women's novel to cite some of her earlier articles and books on the topic. In particular, she very usefully directs her readers to her theory of a "non-dominative aesthetic," and her "ecofeminist literary criticism," "evil, affliction, and redemptive love," "Gnostic imagination," and "feminist-marxist" approaches. Again, we have a variation on *Jewers's* attempts to bring late-twentieth-century methodologies to works written in a much different historical and cultural milieu. At times, I find this sort of tactic intrusive and disingenuous toward the primary material, and other times, I find it at least persuasive and interesting. In Donovan's study, I find the critical methods appropriate to her discussion of specifically women's concerns as evidenced in literature written in a distinctly

different sphere. But this does raise the problem, then, of ghettoizing women's literature in a domestic, private space, which leads to the very neglect that we saw evidenced in Jewers's study.

As for the organization and support in Donovan's book, her study, like Jewers's, begins with a valuable introductory chapter that surveys the major theorists on the history of the novel—specifically, the women's tradition within the genre. Less developed and much sketchier than Jewers's, Donovan's introduction surveys the approaches taken by the usual suspects: Watts, Lukacs, Doody, Goldmann, and Richetti, and it very helpfully places these critics within a gendered critical context. Most interesting to someone who had just read the Jewers study is Donovan's use of Bakhtin's "Epic and the Novel." While Jewers employed the same essay to privilege parody as the central feature of the novel, Donovan claims that private, domestic space is the domain of the novel's concerns: "the novel operates in a 'zone of familiar contact' ... to extend Bakhtin's argument, the novel valorizes events from the everyday world of mothers....Parody, satire, travesty—these are the fundamental responses the novel has toward institutionalized dogma, according to Bakhtin" (3-4). But if parody and irony are essentially the same device, how does casuistry fit into Donovan's scheme? She defines "casuistry" as the attempt "to claim that a case is not to be judged in the abstract but always relative to its particular circumstances. Circumstantial details can change the purport of any given case and thus an understanding of them is necessary for fair ethical and aesthetic judgment to take place....The novel itself is the genre that best allows the expression of particularized individual cases" (xi). No one, I think, would disagree with this assertion, but the problem becomes one of tone. How does an ironic or parodic tone advance the case of women who desire, above all else, to be taken seriously by a literary establishment that has effectively silenced them? Donovan's supporting chapters trace her response to this question, and at the same time they cover a good deal of important ground. There are perhaps no new writers or works discussed here, but the attention given to all of these writers in this slim volume is in itself a valuable contribution.

Linda Lang-Peralta's collection of essays on aspects of "women, revolution, and the novels of the 1790s" is characteristic of a number of recent collections by diverse hands: some of these essays are strong and original, while others are predictable and break no new ground whatsoever. Although stating that the essays are intended to reflect the intersections between literature and popular culture, the volume's individual pieces tend to focus on the standard approaches to gender and class that have been current for a number of years. Some of the essays are simply not appropriate for a volume on women and revolution, one such being Carl Fisher's "The Crowd and the Public in Godwin's Caleb Williams." Also misplaced in the volume is Clara D. McLean's "Lewis's *The Monk* and the Matter of Reading." Both essays would be more appropriate in a collection of essays on the Gothic. That being said, there are some strong essays, in particular Catherine H. Decker's "Women and Public Space in the Novel of the 1790s." This opens up a topic that has been growing in importance since Habermas's influential work on the development of the public sphere during the eighteenth century. Decker challenges easy assumptions about public and private separate spheres, and goes on to delineate what she calls the "seven ideological positions of the novels of the 1790s": "the Misogynist/Libertine position and the Chivalrous/Quixotic position," "the Traditional Patriarchal position," "the fashionable Patriarchal position," "the Sentimental Position," the "Internalized/Reformed Patriarchal position," and "the Feminist position" (7-20). What's most interesting about her cataloguing of these familiar

ideological stances is the way she picks apart each of them in order to reveal the "fundamental flaws" of each.

Other interesting essays in this volume include Barbara Benedict's "Radcliffe, Godwin, and Self-Possession in the 1790s" and Shawn Lisa Mauer's "Masculinity and Morality in Elizabeth Inchbald's *Nature and Art*." Glynis Ridley's "Injustice in the Works of Godwin and Wollstonecraft" considers "whether male and female novelists of the 1790s addressed the issue of radical language in different ways" (70), while Eleanor Ty focuses on "The Imprisoned Female Body in Mary Hays's *The Victim of Prejudice*." The appearance of this particular collection suggests that there is a growing recognition of the importance of a historically specific approach to women writers, rather than the sort of sweeping study practiced by Donovan. The strength of such collections, however, will be measured finally in the originality and usefulness of each individual essay.

Strange as it may seem after all these years, the history of the novel continues to be a topic that is under debate. The inclusion of women writers in the canon will of necessity cause a shift in focus, but clearly the contemporary challenge is to find a critical methodology that will stand the test of time. Recognition and rediscovery of forgotten "minor" writers and genres is an important strategy, but ultimately we need to speak in a language that recognizes specific historical nuances and realities.

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