

## Book Reviews

Eleanor Ty. *Unsex'd Revolutionaries: Five Women Novelists of the 1790's*. Toronto, Buffalo, and London: U of Toronto P, 1993. pp. xvii, 189. \$18.95 pb.

In this closely argued and valuable study, Eleanor Ty reads novels by Mary Wollstonecraft (*Wrongs of Woman; or Maria*), Mary Hays (*Memoirs of Emma Courtney, Victim of Prejudice*), Helen Maria Williams (*Julia*), Elizabeth Inchbald (*A Simple Story, Nature and Art*), and Charlotte Smith (*Emmeline, Desmond, The Young Philosopher*) and shows how these radical writers responded to the revolutionary crisis of the 1790s by producing a distinctive and itself revolutionary body of fiction: a politicized, passionate, and linguistically maternalized variant of the sentimental or domestic novel. Ty argues that in fictionalizing their own alternative visions and expressing their dissatisfaction with the Burkean concept of the benevolent patriarch and with what we now think of as the Law of the Father, these five novelists employed a specifically female or maternal aesthetic. This aesthetic is especially relevant to a point Ty makes in her introduction, namely, that while the scare-mongering conservative detractors of the time imaged the period's protofeminist authors as "unsex'd" or licentious advocates of a "Gallic mania," the "revolutionaries" about whom Ty writes are not so much proponents of a French-inspired mania or madness as of an inherently British tradition that conceptualizes revolutionary energy as natural, even orderly. In this sense, Ty suggests, the five novelists are daughters of the "Glorious" Revolution of 1688 and of the astronomical concept of revolution as a rotation of bodies, "a circular motion returning to its point of origin" and offering (as in 1688) an escape from a usurping tyranny and a restoration of original and lost liberties. These five writers "believed in the succession and restoration of rights which were 'natural' in the same way as the rotation of the heavenly bodies was natural" (6). This is an interesting adumbration of Ty's larger thesis and her implicit argument, first, that the radical novelist's revolution is a liberation from the usurping tyranny of a patriarchal-linguistic discourse and the symbolic order of the Father and, second,

that it is a restoration of, or return to, a pre-Oedipal and natural modality of female self-expression intimately bound up with the daughter's original relation to the body of her mother.

In her reading of the novels, Ty employs a psycho-linguistic model that is in part Lacanian and draws upon *l'écriture féminine* associated with Irigaray. She also uses Kristeva's concept of the pre-symbolic or "semiotic," an order of expressiveness derived from the mother's body and signified by pulsation, rhythm, flux, heterogeneity, and disruption. A second part of Ty's model draws on Nancy Chodorow's ideas about mothering, as developed by Margaret Homans, who theorizes that the post-Oedipal daughter's relation to language is different from that of the post-Oedipal son. Homans suggests that in so far as the daughter "retains the literal or the pre-symbolic language that the son represses at the time of [his] renunciation of his mother" (qtd. in Ty 22), she has access to both modes but may prefer or remain closer to the literal. Among the maternally derived writing strategies illuminated by this model and employed by the five novelists are repetition, replication, and literalization. In effect, the practice of such a linguistics constitutes a natural rotation, that is, a succession or movement away from the symbolic and figurative. This is also a restoration of the literal and concrete, as when, for example, the abstract and metaphoric idea of marriage as female imprisonment is literalized—or *materializes*, as it were—in the situation of the wife incarcerated in an actual prison. Literalization is used both repetitively and in self-replicating layers in Wollstonecraft's volatile and often-sentimental *Wrongs of Woman*, where multiple narratives about imprisoned, enslaved, and brutalized women produce a semiotic or maternalized effusion. This gives "Wollstonecraft's arguments more power and poignancy: repeated use of various metaphors of confinement which become real—trap, cage, bastille, fetters—create a cumulative effect of psychological constriction and claustrophobia in the narrative" (36). Throughout her study, Ty emphasizes the importance of these particular metaphors in the revolutionary's critique of woman's moral, economic, social, and sexual oppression.

In politicizing the eighteenth-century sentimental novel, the revolutionaries of the 1790s also maternalized and further domesticated some of its conventions, notably that of the distressed heroine, the virgin beseeged. An interesting variant of the virgin-in-distress is thus the wife-in-distress, a plot used by Smith in *Desmond*, where the bachelor-hero's infatuation with Geraldine Verney (married with children) is replicated when Bethel, his mentor-confidante, also succumbs to her allure and falls, albeit respectfully, in love with her. As Ty reads this situation, "Bethel's support of Desmond's love for a married woman becomes a political statement about the integrity of that love, and may help influence readers in their thinking about the validity of the relationship" (132)—not that adultery, illicit love, and *les liaisons danger-*

*euses* are new motifs, but they have formerly been the tender of the French novelist, not the British. The motif of the wife-in-distress, in turn, has variants. The most complex and certainly the most interesting of these removes it from the direct arena of sexual and gender politics and places it within the context of mother-daughter relationship, a prominent concern throughout Ty's study and a focus of several of the novels she examines. In Smith's *Young Philosopher* the besieged woman, Laura Glenmorris, pregnant with the potential heir to the family estate but deprived of her husband's protection, is held literal captive by his greedy, menacing, and deadly great-aunt, who hopes to preserve the estate in her own sons' interest. In Ty's reading of this gothic problematizing (and literalization) of a latent mother-daughter plot, the persecutory and witch-like maternal gaoler is a screen for the heroine's personal mother, the scenario itself is a scripting of female identity issues, and the terror, rage, and dread experienced by the pregnant woman as her lying-in approaches are a vehicle for channeling "common female fears about sexuality and maternity" (149). Also, Ty suggests, the classic virgin's anxieties about violation and assault give way in this novel to those of the child-bearing woman facing her own mortality and re-experiencing "what Kristeva would classify as one's earliest pre-verbal or semiotic fears of death and pain . . ." (149). Ty's readings of three of Smith's novels are among the high points of her book.

As to why the novels she explores have not been easily accepted into the canon, Ty points out that they are what Barthes terms "writerly" rather than "readerly" texts: "the writerly text draws attention to the cultural voices or codes responsible for its enunciation, reveals multiplicity instead of consistency, and signifies flux instead of stable meaning." And because such works "incessantly question social and narrative conventions," they "necessitate a different way of reading and interpretation" (156). Ty's *Unsex'd Revolutionaries: Five Women Novelists of the 1790's* is an important contribution to this project and a thoughtful model for what one hopes will be more studies like it.

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Anne K. Mellor. *Romanticism and Gender*. New York: Routledge, 1993. pp. ix, 275. \$45.00; \$14.95 pb.

Mellor bills *Romanticism and Gender* as "the first attempt to give a broad view of British Romantic literature from a feminist perspective." As such, it is a long overdue project, since too many "current cultural and scholarly descriptions of . . . Romanticism are unwittingly gender-biased" and continue to focus "almost exclusively upon the writings and thought of six male poets (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Blake, Byron, Shelley, and Keats)." In an attempt to shake the continued perception