


2014

Novels, Philosophies, and Sex

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Recommended Citation

Hultquist, Aleksondra (2014) "Novels, Philosophies, and Sex," *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830*. Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.
<https://www.doi.org/http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/2157-7129.4.1.9>
Available at: <https://scholarcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol4/iss1/9>

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Keywords

Novels, philosophy, libertinism, Aphra Behn, John Rochester

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Kathleen Lubey. *Excitable Imaginations: Eroticism and Reading in Britain, 1660-1760*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2012. \$85.00, 273 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, notes, and index. ISBN: 978-1-61148-440-3.

Rebecca Tierney-Hynes. *Novel Minds: Philosophers and Romance Readers, 1680-1740*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2012. \$85.00, 223 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. ISBN:978-0-230-36937-5.

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How do we learn? How do we read? How do we think? And who are we? Recently, scholars have cleverly joined the supposedly “frivolous” fiction and poetry of the later seventeenth- and early eighteenth-centuries to the “profound” philosophers of the long eighteenth century in order to answer these questions. Two recent and intelligently written monographs in this arena are by Rebecca Tierney-Hynes and Kathleen Lubey. Both scholars manage to delve intimately and cleverly into the question of the philosophical impact of popular works—such as romances, novels, pornography, and erotica—and how such genres answer questions about reading, emotion, sex, and the self.

The more general of the two is Rebecca Tierney-Hynes’s book, *Novel Minds: Philosophers and Romance Readers, 1680-1740*, which explores the intellectual interplay between “romance readers” and “philosophers” of the early part of the long eighteenth century. Tierney-Hynes’s claim is a big one, “about how the experience of reading romance, the ‘giddy Delight’, the pleasure and transport it induces, comes to be transferred to and transformed in philosophical explanations of how we experience the world” (3). Big as it is, it is nevertheless a solid claim, one that pulls together the latest research in how the novel crafted thought in the eighteenth century. It helps us post-moderns to better understand the early modern self, a self that Tierney-Hynes proposes begins in “the seductive, feminized, and relatively ephemeral forms of the very early novel” (7). The book is yet another strong offering in Palgrave’s series, *Studies in the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and Cultures of Print*, edited by Anne K. Mellor and Clifford Siskin.

In the eighteenth century, Tierney-Hynes argues, romance becomes a slippery term, moving from the characteristics of a genre to the dangers of reading—and this slippage becomes a place “to reconfigure the imagination and reimagine a model of self” (5). She supports her argument by examining the explorations of the self as they were being developed by the big-name philosophers we have come to associate with this time period: Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Anthony Ashley Cooper, the Earl of Shaftesbury, David Hume, Francis Bacon, Francis Hutcheson, Robert Boyle, and others. Her readings frame a discussion of female authors of the early novel (Aphra Behn, Delarivier Manley, and Eliza Haywood), and she concludes, as all studies in this era will, with Samuel Richardson and *Pamela*. There is an impressive scope here, and her reading of early fiction through time skillfully examines gradations of the reconfigurations of the philosophies of romance: Locke’s metaphorical romances; Behn’s

evolution from dramatic to epistolary romances; Shaftsbury's and Haywood's psychology of the romance; Hume's romance of the self; and finally Richardson's romantic reader.

As an example of a typically strong chapter, Tierney-Hynes's engagement with Aphra Behn describes Behn's authorial flexibility from drama to fiction, thus defining how Behn's work demonstrates "The affiliations among spectacle, sense, and the passions, and the way they are translated into and modified in the criticism of seventeenth-century fiction" (59). Behn's prolific writings and her ability to move easily between genres, taking those parts of each genre that are strongest and adapting them to her purposes, allow her to create an early modern "romantic" self, which is itself dramatic, mutable, political, personal, and affective. For Tierney-Hynes, Behn's ability to move the discourses of romance from drama form to epistolary form evidences the "performance of the rhetoric of romance" (77). Using the construct she had defined for us in the introduction, theoretically moving from feeling to reading, Tierney-Hynes takes us in a very practical way through Behn's explorations and manifestations of such ideas. The romance isn't a genre so much as it is a state of being, one that for Behn has affiliations between spectacle, sense and the passions (59), and thus Tierney-Hynes successfully concludes that "For Behn, the reading self is also, triumphantly, the passionate self" (90).

Tierney-Hynes's grasp of the complexities and nuances of the philosophical mind of the eighteenth century is firm. Her close readings of both philosophy and fiction are deft and interesting, such as when she clearly articulates her reading of Hume. For Tierney-Hynes, Hume's essay "On Essay Writing," a work withdrawn from all post-1742 editions of his essays, is a key tenet for her discussion of gender, reading and the romance. Sympathy, gender and self are entirely engaged in Hume's essay, she claims, a combination that intersects with the production and ingestion of the romance. She argues that "the interaction between Hume's definitions of reading practices and his definition of mind interpolates femininity as so central an aspect of these definitions that the reading self cannot be described as a self apart from the gendered self" (117).

However, despite the stated thesis that the self is "seductive, feminized, and relatively ephemeral," the exploration into female authors is less ambitious than this idea would seem to present (7). The explorations into the philosophers and masculine writers are intelligent and fresh, but her analysis does not necessarily deliver as well as it could on the female authors as she suggests in the first chapter. Behn, Manley, and Haywood are given top priority, but other female authors who have just as much to teach us about self, romance, readership and the early novel—such as Penelope Aubin, Susanna Centlivre, and Mary Davys to name but a few who would fit nicely into the discussion in terms of both the time frame and the romance—are not explored at all. This is hardly a major failing. After all, a book can only hold so much, but our readership may have to look elsewhere to read (or perhaps they need to write) the monograph of how female authors may have lead the way for masculine philosophies. This criticism notwithstanding, Tierney-Hynes's book works well as a whole; it is delightful, for instance, to see such thoughtful and articulate writing. Additionally there is an inclusive index; not only are authors duly noted, with subheadings more extensive than simply their works, but also the subjects covered in the book themselves are accounted for, and sub-headed. *Novel Minds* certainly explores and supports its claim that "The reader of romance represents the affective underpinnings of empiricist epistemology and eighteenth-century theories of self" (7).

Delving more specifically into theories of readership and the novel is Kathleen Lubey's *Excitable Imaginations: Eroticism and Reading in Britain, 1660-1760*. Taking a more exacting view of readership and epistemology, Lubey focuses on what the erotic materials in, of, and around the early novel do for self-knowledge and readership strategies. This is a fantastic addition to Bucknell's increasingly impressive eighteenth-century lists, and especially editor Greg Clingham's series, *Transits: Literature, Thought and Culture*. Because it focuses particularly on the eroticism of the eighteenth-century novel, Lubey's argument centers specifically on the mutual engagement of reader and writer in the discourses of eroticism, and how their interplay opened up new and intense possibilities of philosophies of mind, reading, and culture in the period. She claims that "while empiricist and moral philosophers anatomize the levels at which thought and feeling occur, authors concerned with the private lives of individuals reveal minds in motion, minds that are most transparent in characters beset by passion and desire," (2) which she calls a "long process of coupling bodily pleasure with mental reflection" (2). It is a sexy idea, and one that Lubey explores thoroughly through contemporary philosophy, readership theory, and popular fiction. The stated purpose of the book is to explore the "various strategies, ranging from the chaste to the pornographic,[used] to prove the utility of reading about sex for the broader purpose of learning one's own moral and self-governing capabilities"(2). The bulk of her study examines those writers of fiction in the earlier portion of the eighteenth century: Joseph Addison, Eliza Haywood, John Cleland, Samuel Richardson and a host of anonymous and little-known authors of erotic novels in the period—though she begins with the Libertine poems of John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester and Aphra Behn and includes erotic image makers such as William Hogarth as well.

The first few chapters of the book lay out the theoretical paths that Lubey will tread throughout eroticism from 1680-1760: she explains the importance of eroticism to instruction which requires "a sophisticated balancing act in readers" (7), whom she cannily defines as the private owners of "autonomous bodies and minds" (12); and she articulates the distinctive connection between reading, the imagination, aesthetics, and eroticism. She also sets out the terms in which she explores the "visual" aspects of her close readings, the "poetic pictures" (from the written word) and actual pictures (such as paintings and prints) that are created through readerly arousal. After explaining how and why "moderating the passions was seen to be a self-directed task by the 1740s, and intimate relationships were privileged contexts for learning and observing these moderations" (120), she moves on to the ways in which readership and eroticism lead to self knowledge.

Lubey is specifically interested in connecting the pleasures of imagination, the pleasures of reading, and the pleasures of the body in a triad of philosophic acquirement of knowledge—a kind of "I read sex, therefore I am." The meatiest, longest, and most representative chapter of the book, for instance, explores "What Sex Does in Early Novels," where Lubey deals with the thorny questions of "how and why the inevitability of sex emerges as a customary tenet of realist fiction" (109), especially as these "moral" fictions of the mid-century were claiming to steer the reading public away from licentious and scandalous reading, even as they were co-opting the provocative strategies of libertine literature for new moral ends. The chapter unpacks an interesting time in the development of the novel, when the salacious and libertine texts of the early part of the period were being replaced with the narratives we now associate with domestic

fiction, a genre in which sexual descriptions work to resist sexual eagerness. Lubey unpacks this paradox by concentrating on the nuances between descriptions of sex for pleasure, descriptions of sex for edification, and the slippage that occurs between author and reader, the space between the written word and the way in which a reader interprets those words. The tightrope walking required by writers and readers is the focus of Lubey's excitable imaginations: that to learn about sex, one must write and read about it; but if one writes and reads about sex, the potential for bad knowledge can outweigh the good. She claims that "Erotic encounters, nearly ubiquitous in mid-century novels, demand special figuration on the part of authors and therefore, exercise readers' interpretive skills in especially taxing ways" (110). This middle chapter bridges the movement in the era that progresses from the earlier task of literature, exploring and understanding personal emotion, to the mid-century concern with controlling and shaping personal emotion. Lubey articulates her ideas by reading unknown pornographic works of the period against Richardson's *Pamela*, a sound choice given the erotic interpretations of the work that worked against his stated aims of moral instruction (Though I can't resist pointing out that the heft of this chapter, for me at least, brings up the question—is the eighteenth-century fictional self really *all* about *Pamela*? We seem to think it is, but are we right?).

Excitable Imaginations aptly delivers on its promise to explain "how literature and philosophy attempt to prevent erotic misinterpretation by theorizing the mind's work for readers as they bear witness to amorous scenes" (2). Lubey has also included a coda—a helpful analytical summary and leaping off point that many recent monographs have lacked (an exceptional feature of Bucknell's "Transits" titles). It wraps up her ideas and leaves the reader with inspiration for further explorations and projects; for instance, she hints at the ways in which her theories can engage later writers of the era, such as Hume and Burke, and their theories of emotion and sentiment. One structural weakness of the book is a limited index, which amply covers the authors she cites, but is thin on the concepts she engages with. There is, however, a list of almost twenty illustrations, some novelistic and some erotic that greatly augment Lubey's readings, which draw evidence not just from textual materials but also from the visual analysis of illustrations in *Pamela* and *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* as well as many of Hogarth's works. These plates are well chosen and necessary for the full analysis of the ideas Lubey has at stake.

Overall these books demonstrate clearly the high quality we have come to expect of both Palgrave and Bucknell: timely subjects, excellent scholarship, accurate documentation, and attentive copy editing. Tierney-Hynes and Lubey have done an admirable job of deepening the context for the early novel—not as precursor to the "great" novels of the latter half of the century, but as a starting place for the very theories and concerns of the age of enlightenment at large, questions that center around epistemology and the studies of reading, cognition, and the self. Lubey and Tierney-Hynes emphasize that these are central concerns of the long eighteenth century, not just manifestations of the late-century novel.