

**Pilar Cuder-Domínguez, ed. 2014**  
***Genre in English Literature, 1650-1700:***  
***Transitions in Drama and Fiction***  
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The title of this collection of seven essays edited by Pilar Cuder-Domínguez is ambitious in scope, its subtitle, despite excluding poetry, only slightly less so. Titles are tricky things and often have to be negotiated with publishers (an earlier title for this collection, *Critical Explorations of Genre in English Literature, 1650-1700*, appears ghost-like on p. xi); yet on the whole, the book manages to chew most of what it bites off, which is no mean feat. It unpicks what Cuder-Domínguez terms in her brief Introduction the “neat evolutionary pattern” (ix-x) into which critics, sights set firmly on the eighteenth century, generally shoe-horn literature of the second half of the seventeenth century; it throws much new and fascinating light onto Restoration drama; and it corroborates the importance of female agency, whether as author, reader or protagonist, in the gradual emergence of the novel. Indeed, five of the contributions make a convincing case for the need to appraise issues of genre in fiction and drama alike from the perspective of gender. Nonetheless, in the absence of any acknowledgement of other factors like social class and political or confessional allegiance, this emphasis risks distorting the overall picture and might somehow have been adverted in the title.

In the first chapter, “Spatial Practices in the Works of Margaret Cavendish,” Pilar Cuder-Domínguez argues that Cavendish’s generic experimentation is a means to challenging prevailing gender

norms. Taking Cavendish's drama first, Cuder-Domínguez applies Henri Lefebvre's (1974) notion of space as being the historically constituted "result of social interaction" (4) to show how *The Female Academy*, *The Convent of Pleasure*, *Bell in Campo* and *Youths Glory and Deaths Banquet* are organised around female retirement. If in the plays "women's self-sufficient worlds prove to be extremely fragile" (13), Cavendish's female characters attain more lasting agency through the trope of travel as exploited in her prose fiction, which combines forms and modes of romance, utopian fiction and travel writing. As Lady Victoria proclaimed in the second part of *Bell in Campo*, "go[ing] abroad" can release women from "control" and the need to account for their actions (19); Cuder-Domínguez demonstrates through her analyses of *Assaulted and Pursued Chastity* and *The Revision of a New World, Called The Blazing World* how it can also insert them into "masculine roles and spaces" (21) or enable their rise from "silent victim to eloquent absolute monarch" (Wallraven 2004:147; qtd. Cuder-Domínguez 2104:24). In short, Cavendish's drama and, more confidently, her fiction produce "counterspaces" where the female can "resist the dominant" (25).

In chapter 2, "Kaleidoscopic Genres: William Davenant's Interregnum Drama," Rafael Vélez-Núñez offers a new take on his chosen writer's entertainments or "opera" written under the Republic. Against the conventional view that Puritan politics conditioned change in dramatic practice, Vélez-Núñez proposes that Davenant carried on into the period experiments with dramatic form that had commenced under the patronage of Charles I. Thus he was able to "transmut[e] the splendor of courtly masques into public performances" (37) and to combine in "the exemplary genre" of his opera "dramatic restrictions, moral requirements, and his own generic innovations" (40). 1656 becomes a key year in theatre history with *The First Days Entertainment*, which inaugurated newly legalised performances, followed by *The Siege of Rhodes* and its introduction of recitative and scene changes onto the English public stage. It is not clear (nor need it be) whether Davenant's prosecution of Puritan morals and his advocacy of the political function of poetry in *The Preface to Gondibert* (1654-1655) was opportunist or sincere. But Vélez-Núñez argues persuasively for the importance of Davenant's work not only as a technical precursor of Restoration drama, but also as evidence of a more ideologically and aesthetically relaxed interregnum than is commonly supposed.

In chapter 3, "The Making of Restoration Comedy: Critical Theory and Dramatic Practice," Juan A. Prieto-Pablos offers us a masterly synthesis of the development and diversity of the genre based on the practical evidence of the plays rather than the theoretical precepts of Dryden and the rest. The negotiations between "the neoclassical school" and those who pursued "the continuation of the English dramatic forms" (64) fostered a genre which is much more heterogeneous than the focus of conventional histories on the comedy of manners suggests. There was general compliance with moderately elastic unities; hybridization of tragedy and comedy was tolerated; romantic love plots promoting honour were more frequent than sexual comedy, which on Prieto-Pablos's account "was not as pervasive nor [sic] as typical" (76) as is often thought; in the 1660s blank verse coexisted with prose, but was gradually superseded by it in the 1670s; what Dryden termed "repartee," the forerunner of polite conversation, was celebrated, slang, farce and buffoonery, associated with the lower classes, outlawed (except in John Lacy and Richard Flecknoe); and, eschewing the either/or debate of Dryden and Thomas Shadwell, most comedies of the period ably mixed gallants and fools, pure entertainment with edifying satire. Prieto-Pablos should be congratulated for this lucid and fine-tuned perspective from which to reconsider Restoration comedy.

In chapter 4, "The Motives of Tragedy, 1677-1682: Theory and Practice," Zenón Luis-Martínez analyses Restoration tragedy from the challenging vantage gained after grafting Kenneth Burke's theory of action onto Walter Benjamin's ([1928] 1977) concept of baroque German *Trauerspiel*, or play of sorrow. Equating style understood Aristotelically as composed of "plot, character, thought, diction, and spectacle" (103) with Burke's motive of "agency," Luis-Martínez shows how dramatic theory and practice of the period redefined English tragedy, founding its claims to originality on its emphasis on lexis rather than mythos and its replacement of rhyming couplets with blank verse. The upshot was a tragedy whose protagonists, like those of *trauerspiel*, were plunged out of myth or heroism and squarely into "creaturely" history, "often manifested in strained, plaintive representations of subjective uncertainty in a universe devoid of God" (116). Thomas Rhymer's yearning for "poetical justice" becomes "the desire for a harmonious reordering of the chaotic space of history" (119). The third main section,

"Agency: Tragic Manners," draws on Hobbesian psychology to suggest that in tragedies like Nathaniel Lee's *The Rival Queens* "Heroic cogitation is replaced now with a violent poetics of bodily pain" as "the fatal and the physiological are summoned to share a common uncanny space in the character's body" (132, 133). Intellectually bracing and elegantly composed, Luis-Martínez's chapter covering the full spectrum of Restoration tragedians (Dryden, Lee, Nahum Tate, Thomas Otway, Edward Ravenscroft and John Bancroft) is a landmark monograph waiting to be written.

In chapter 5, "'Look to Thy Self and Guard Thy Character': She-Tragedy and the Conflicts of Female Visibility," Paula de Pando provides a succinct, level-headed account of her chosen genre and its evolution through the 1680s and 1690s. In opposition to the prevailing view of a monolithic genre exploiting female performers in order to purvey a balanced mix of titillation and political allegory, de Pando suggests that the she-tragedies of Otway and Thomas Southerne, who are credited with the creation of genre, John Banks, Mary Pix and Catharine Trotter amount to a rich and varied corpus which "unveils repressed anxieties at the core of society and exposes its flaws through their fatal consequences for its weakest members" (173). Thus, Thomas Southerne's *The Fatal Marriage*, far from consolidating gender relations, shows how prostitution and marriage are complementary aspects of the same sexual economy; Pix's *Ibrahim* adumbrates a transformation from passive, female victimhood to "active political commitment" (171); and Trotter's *Agnes de Castro*, in its depiction of self-sacrifice and friendship, aspires to a "feminocentric universe untainted by the corruption of male social dynamics" (172). De Pando is to be thanked for providing in so few pages such a convincing sketch of an all too-often misrepresented sub-genre.

In chapter 6, "Geographies of Interiority: Exile in Women's Epistolary Fiction of the Restoration," Sonia Villegas-López supplies a lack in novel studies by reviewing epistolary fiction produced between 1660-1700, a period usually overlooked in histories of the novel's rise. Her account of influences (Ovid's *Heroides*, Gabriel Joseph de Lavergene, count of Guilleragues's, *Lettres Portugaises*), contexts (the creation of the English Post Office) and critical responses is exemplary, while her narrative of the consolidation of a literary form from Margaret Cavendish's *CCXI Sociable Letters*,

through Aphra Behn's *Love Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister*, in whose three volumes the gradual supersession of first-person letters by third-person narrative answers to increasingly plotted construction; to the greater realism of Catharine Trotter's *Olinda's Adventures* is clear and useful. Less successful is Villegas-López's attempt to position her chosen works within a master-trope of female exile defined so broadly – both “physical departure” and “mental withdrawal” (182) – as to become a catch-all bereft of analytical utility. This misplaced ambition may account for the inclusion of Delarivier Manley's *Letters* (“not properly an epistolary novel” but “a seemingly autobiographical travelogue,” 198-99); fortunately, however, Villegas-López's stated aim takes second place to sound exposition and no-nonsense analysis.

Finally, in chapter 7, “Transgressing Class, Gender and Genre: The Jilt Narratives of Restoration England,” Jorge Figueroa-Dorrego presents an attractive cluster of works from different genres which centre on the female figure of the “jilt.” The anonymous *The London Jilt: or, The Politick Whore*, an early English picaresque novel, charts the progress of Cornelia whose sexual trading anticipates Moll Flanders's; the also anonymous *The German Princess Revived* is a criminal biography of Jenney Voss, an inveterate thief who endured transportation and was hanged at Tyburn; and Alexander Oldys's *The Female Gallant: or, The Wife's the Cuckold* is a short novel whose farcical plotting around mistaken identities, cross-dressing and bed-tricks shows its close kinship with stage comedy. In this respect, Figueroa-Dorrego notes how the “jilt” is the female equivalent of restoration comedy's rake, the main differences being their generic habitats and contrasting roles as villainess and hero respectively. Jilt narratives served to admonish women, caution men and titillate in roughly equal doses, at the same time as they disclose anxiety over the permeability of social and sexual boundaries. While not quite, perhaps, “unsettl[ing]” (246) generic borders as Figueroa-Dorrego contends, the literary jilt's easy adaptation to different genres mirrors the resourceful versatility of her historical counterparts.

Overall, Cuder-Dominguez's collection will be of great use to newcomer and specialist alike as a wide-ranging overview of much of the literature of the period and related literary-critical research, while one or two of its contributions may well set agendas for future scholarship in the field. If fault were to be found it would be with the

not quite satisfying blend of some chapters devoted to individual writers and others tackling whole genres; also with the Introduction, which is a little disingenuous when rueing the absence of “decentr[ing]” (xi) analyses of Restoration fiction and drama: the ample footnotes to each chapter attest to much scholarly attention to the writers and issues treated in this volume, without that being to its or its contributors’ discredit. Yet these are minor cavils. Commendably unfazed by master narratives of literary genesis and evolution, suspicious of facile causalities between generic convulsion and political turmoil, generally uncluttered by jargon and wearing its learning lightly, this collection of essays deserves a large audience and is a welcome reminder that the flies on the axle-wheels of literary history raise their own dust. It also bears impressive testimony to the formidable health of seventeenth-century English literary studies in Spain.

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