

Luis-Martínez, Zenón and Jorge Figueroa-Dorrego (eds.) 2003:
Re-shaping the Genres. Restoration Women Writers
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We should welcome the initiative of Professors Luis-Martínez and Figueroa-Dorrego, as their *Re-shaping the Genres. Restoration Women Writers* successfully fills a gap in the literary criticism of generic and gender studies. This collection of papers intends to revise the canon, attending to the generic innovations that women writers brought about during the Restoration period, a contribution that, since these authors were marginal (and marginalized) figures in the academic canon, has been largely ignored for centuries.

Even if the last two decades have witnessed an increasing vindication of these writers, developing a blooming critical field, the originality of this book lies in the conflation of different approaches, which makes it a useful volume. The intention of the editors is stated in the introduction, where they announce that the main aim of the book is to make accessible to the general public their “fascination for early women writers” (9). Indeed, some references are clearly intended for the non-initiated reader, as the explanation of the importance of the third day for a playwright (126); but, besides its value as a comprehensive guide for any student of the period, it constitutes an excellent resource for more professional readers, especially for those interested in recent theoretical approaches to Restoration texts, namely, New Historicism and Cultural Materialism. Most contributors pay homage to Bakhtin’s concept of *heteroglossia*, but it could also be argued that the strategies they analyze are a departure from what Cixous would call the ‘phallogocentric’ system. The impressive bibliography that informs the readings of the texts covers a wide scope from the foundational texts of Cotton, Spencer, Spender, Pearson, Todd, Williamson, and Rubik, among others (9), to the latest, most up-to-date critical material. The editors themselves acknowledge their indebtedness to these critical touchstones, and their logical purpose is to carry on

their lines of analysis, articulating the debate on a generic frame of reference.

The eleven articles that conform this book are centered on Margaret Cavendish, Anne Killigrew, Aphra Behn, Mary Pix, Delarivier Manley, Catherine Trotter, and Jane Barker, providing an impression of great variety (probably less in the section on 'drama', where one might have expected to see a study on the contributions of Manley, Cavendish and Trotter, or at least the only briefly mentioned Susanna Centlivre, alongside those of the well-known and largely studied Behn and Pix). It may seem that the thorough analysis of certain authors has imposed itself over the search for variety. However, far from creating an impression of repetition, it makes a coherent picture of the lively and constantly evolving literary panorama of the Restoration, where the same authors cultivated different genres, breaking generic boundaries in an attempt to broaden the coercive literary rules created by men as defensive barriers of the inaccessible male-biased literary fortress.

In the excellent "Introduction: re-shaping the genres," the editors express their hope of making their zest "less the privilege of a minority" (9) and foreground the theoretical guidelines of the different essays that conform the collection. It is not only a comprehensive picture of the state of affairs in this field of study, but it also points to the new critical paths that remain unexplored.

"Part I. Lyric poetry: expanding the codes" is devoted to the analysis of female poets and their use of certain genres as an instrument to acquire a social status and a literary agency that were a masculine prerogative. María Isabel Calderón examines the controversial figure of Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, undermining the myth of the woman writer as lunatic. According to Calderón, the eccentric pose of the woman whom her contemporaries knew as 'Mad Madge' was in fact an act of rebellion, a strategy to be seen in a patriarchal system which made women invisible. Calderón has an interesting point when she says that Cavendish's unconventional image and her longing for uniqueness is related to her search for literary fame, but also to her strong class-consciousness.

Rafael Vélez's "Broken emblems: Anne Killigrew's pictorial poetry" is probably the most original essay in this collection, since it deals with the innovative re-shaping of one of the most characteristic genres of European Humanism: the emblem. Professor Vélez

discusses the historical connection of poetry and painting, and defends the novelty of Killigrew as she appropriates this convention in order to expose female reification and masculine sexual aggression. The emblem, which traditionally had a moral and religious significance, is transformed into a vehicle for social and political messages, showing how gender vindications subvert generic conventions.

The last essay in this first part is Jorge Casanova's "'Hell in epitomy': Jane Barker's visions and recreations". Casanova brings us a rather obscure author, who was a "Jacobite, spinster, Catholic, woman writer among men" (69). As in the case of Cavendish, Barker's work is in fact a 'self-fashioning': both women turned to poetry searching for the special status it conferred writers. Two aspects of this essay are noteworthy: first, Barker's view of the interrelation between poetry and science, anatomy and medicine. This is a fruitful field of study for New Historicists, and Casanova presents it as the realm where women can exert their healing power, a capacity which is useful for men and, because of that, should open the door for "women as active learning agents" (83). Also, Casanova links Barker's "defence of virginal life" (76) to her disenchantment with the literary and political scenario and her farewell to poetry. Barker rejects the models that inspired her at the beginning of her career (like Katherine Philips and Aphra Behn) and decides to live a life devoted to her "God ... Books and Friends"(77). It seems that Casanova trusts at face value the image of the defeated woman writer who, unable to fight against hostile conditions, turns to less public genres and becomes the meek, invisible, virginal woman she was expected to be. Much has been written on 'virginity' as the ultimate rejection of masculine control, as it can be seen, for instance, in the 'coterie' circles of Philips, where intense friendships – and sometimes even lesbian liaisons – were developed (see Vicinus and Benegas). The reader is left without a satisfactory account of the outcome of this 'farewell', especially when we are informed that Barker expanded and revisited in her prose writings the topics she had developed in her poetry: instead of a consequence of the stifling male domination, anxious at witnessing how masculine prerogatives were usurped by women writers, it seems a self-effacing strategy on the part of Barker, a chamaleonic twist in her process of self-fashioning.

“Part II. Drama: changing the scene” is mainly concerned with the plays of the two most prolific women playwrights of the period: Aphra Behn and Mary Pix. Pilar Zozaya analyzes the interplay of the public and the private in women writers’ lives and plays. She presents cross-dressing in *The Rover* as a double-edged weapon which allows women to borrow an alien, liberating code of behaviour while, at the same time, it reifies women, converting them into fetishes for male visual consumption. Zozaya contends that, if the dress-code was a marker of morals and social status, cross-dressing irrevocably meant the carnivalesque reversal and confusion of these controlling labels.

A similar study of the external markers of agency, such as breeches and masks, is what Carlos J. Gómez provides in his “Witty women masking gender and identity: the comedies of Mary Pix in context.” He analyzes Pix’s usage of these theatrical devices, as well as their general significance in the drama of the period. According to Gómez, Pix questions patriarchy only to a certain extent, as the comedies’ formulaic final restoration of order implied a rejection of breeches and the power they conferred. This realistic interpretation departs from the excessive optimism of some feminist readings: Gómez acknowledges the limited possibilities for female agency, as women were safer within the very patriarchal boundaries that restricted their freedom.

Pilar Cuder-Domínguez’s “Of Spain, Moors, and women: the tragedies of Aphra Behn and Mary Pix” aims to fill a gap in gender/genre studies, which have paid little attention to the tragedies written by women. Cuder offers an enlightening political reading of these literary figures, contrasting the dramatic productions of two women writers who, while sharing their views on the situation on women, deploy different political agendas. Behn channels her Royalist ideas through the allegorical portrayal of women, equating Royalism and rebellion with good and evil female characters respectively. On the other hand, Pix presents the victimized maid as the embodiment of the nation. As a Whig, she despises the traditional values of kingship and warrior heroism, which do not serve to protect the people that validate their existence. Thus, both writers explored different representations of female heroism, offering a new definition of ‘pathos’ which would influence subsequent generations of women playwrights.

Zenón Luis-Martínez presents Pix's historical invention *Queen Catherine* as a female interruption of history, completing the male-biased Shakespearean account of history present in his first tetralogy. This view of Pix is more in the line of Gómez than of Cuder-Domínguez, for whom the author fights against the lack of a "valid formula of female heroicity in tragedies" (171), against the former's interpretation of Pix's writings as a less challenging threat to the male status quo. For Luis-Martínez, Pix creates an unhistorical "extravaganza" (201) as a way to fill the gaps of the Shakespearean (i.e. male authoritarian) "histories" with the feminine imprint, slipping an impossible addendum into the irreplaceable, untouchable masculine version. Luis-Martínez claims that Pix made a bold appropriation of generic formulae in order to represent feminine agency, and he interprets chronological inaccuracies as conscious departures from the authoritative, male-dominated view of history.

"Part III. Narrative: engendering fictions" starts with Belén Martín-Lucas' "'A world of my own': Margaret Cavendish's auto/biographic texts." Martín-Lucas explores Cavendish's auto/biographical writings in "A True Relation of My Birth, Breeding and Life" and *The Blazing World* through the prism of reader response theory, stating that Cavendish's preoccupation with posterity and the reception of her works in the future made her scorn contemporary conventions and question, in Gilmore's words, "who's authorized to tell and judge the truth in a culture" (224). It is a very daring positioning, since it challenges the authoritative infallibility of the literary canon in a way unparalleled until postmodernism.

Jorge Figueroa-Dorrego's acute analysis of Behn's use of irony focuses on situational and linguistic irony as a displacement of authority, a defamiliarization of authoritative masculine discourses. Figueroa follows Bakhtin as he defends the dialogic nature of Behn's novels: different voices and different styles constitute "a device to break the monologic mode of discourse" (234). This scepticism also permeates *Oroonoko* and Behn's minor fiction, which provide supportive evidence on Figueroa's thesis.

Sonia Villegas-López's "Devising a new heroine: Catherine Totter's *Olinda's Adventures* and the rise of the novel reconsidered" is a provocative essay that dares challenge the traditional assumptions about the rise of the novel. According to her, many innovations brought about by Defoe, Swift, Richardson, and Fielding appeared in

earlier women's writings, but were largely ignored because these authors were relegated to a marginal position in the history of literature. Trotter's heroine renegotiates "the roles of women in society" (276) and expands generic boundaries at the same time, becoming an important forerunner that deserves critical attention.

The last paper in this volume, by María Jesús Lorenzo, deals with Delarivier Manley's *Letters*. Lorenzo traces the origins and significance of the epistolary mode, presenting its duplicitous nature between life and fiction as the ideal genre for Manley to fashion herself as a literary heroine. It insists on the idea that women writers used literature as a means to create an empowering identity which allowed them to overcome their socio-political constraints.

As a conclusion, the eleven essays in this collection comprehend the main issues that Restoration women writers had to face; the student and the scholar will find illuminating discussions on the contradictory demands on public and private life, the ambiguous relationship with the previous feminine literary models, their struggle to free themselves from the 'phallogocentric' system, the different strategies (ranging from masks and breeches to linguistic irony) to overcome the masculine modes of representation of reality, the dichotomy between exhibitionist self-fashioning and pragmatic self-effacement, the triumphs and the failures of these forerunners. A lively discussion and an up-to-date reference which nobody, neither students nor scholars, should miss.

References

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