

## Reviews/Comptes rendus

Wolfram Schmidgen. *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Law of Property*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002. viii+266pp. £45; US\$75. ISBN 0-521-81702-1.

Wolfram Schmidgen's book on property law and the British novel addresses issues of more general interest than his title suggests. Although law, particularly property law, is central to the discussions of Daniel Defoe (*Robinson Crusoe*), Henry Fielding (*Tom Jones*), and Walter Scott (*Waverley*), it is less prominent in the discussions of Henry Mackenzie (*A Man of Feeling*), Laurence Sterne (*A Sentimental Journey*), and Ann Radcliffe (*A Sicilian Romance* and *The Romance of the Forest*). Even in the former grouping, discussions of property law are more or less substantially subordinate to two other and rather more encompassing arguments, one historical and one literary. The historical argument asks the reader to reconsider both the chronology and the processes of modernization, understood by Schmidgen as the emergence of "objectification" (and all the term entails, such as individualism, bourgeois freedom, alienation). The literary argument, or rather exploration, re-examines the relation of description to narration in eighteenth-century fiction. Rather than description being a stylistic indicator of objectification under capitalism as some earlier Marxist critics have argued—rendering the world as a universe of separate (or "disembedded," in Schmidgen's terms) things—description in eighteenth-century fiction conveys the relational character of all things, both human and otherwise. Schmidgen weaves the historical and literary arguments, often with great sophistication, through six chapters in order to trace how "communal form" (indebted, in the final instance, to property and the law that prescribes its transmission) gets worked into and worked out in the English novel.

At issue in this critical work is nothing less than how current readers understand "lived experience" in the long eighteenth century. Since Ian Watt, at the latest, one important strain in criticism of eighteenth-century fiction has attempted to identify modern forms of individual subjectivity and

social being by examining the discourses of sex, gender, the body, political economy, religion, law, popular culture, news, travel, currency, commodities, empire, trade, medicine, and so on. Although many of these studies, if not most, have proceeded cautiously in tracing the birth of modernity by acknowledging the influence of enduring tradition, most nonetheless have come out squarely in favour of finding in the long eighteenth century the full emergence of a proper bourgeois modernity and its answering subject, at least in cultural if not exactly in political terms. In returning to the argument about the rise of modernity, Schmidgen would have his readers understand the eighteenth century as a “transitional culture” rather than a modern one (64–65). For most of the century, he argues, landed property biases the relation between “persons and things” in favour of the local over the universal, the concrete over the abstract, and the grounded over the movable. For Schmidgen, England’s “transitional culture” remains stubbornly traditional as the persistence of communal forms rooted in the manor house slows the transition to modernity more than critical accounts of the novel have hitherto acknowledged.

The theoretical core of Schmidgen’s study can be found, appropriately enough, in the middle of his book, in the chapter titled “Commodity Fetishism in Heterogeneous Spaces.” He argues that “the prevalence of embedding over disembedding modes ... [in] the novelistic depiction of things in the first half of the eighteenth century” (123) proves that a fully developed modernity (characterized by commodity fetishism that dissociates the object from its origin) has not yet arrived. Instead, in the novels of the first half of the century “communal forms embed persons and things in concrete social, economic, and cultural contexts, preventing their emergence as separate objects that could begin to cultivate exclusive relationships and bounded identities and thus escape the condition of groundedness” (134). Rather than experiencing an existential homelessness, characters and things find their place in, or in relation to, the manor house, which serves as a key link in the great chain of social being. That link begins to weaken over the latter half of the eighteenth century. When it is fully broken—as Schmidgen argues it is in *Waverley*—the “plenitude and interconnectedness that had once characterized human existence” disappears (185).

There is much to like in this ambitious study. Schmidgen’s readings that show how things and lists of things in Defoe and Richardson derive their significance from heterogeneous spaces with determinative meanings are compelling and insightful. Likewise, his reading of the Man of the Hill episode from *Tom Jones* makes a good case for seeing that character as an avatar of the modern individual, one who depends on his perceptual powers to provide an aesthetic recompense for the loss of social relation. In his reading of this episode, Schmidgen notes that the Man of the Hill sees beauty but fails to hear distress. His aesthetic relation to the landscape emerges as a form of alienation, a hypertrophy of the solitary imagination that can be

read as a signal of a gradual loss of “interconnectedness.” This provocative reading stands against the claim that Allworthy and Paradise Hall provide evidence of a vision of an unalienated totality that survives the turmoil swirling about it. *Tom Jones*, Schmidgen argues, creates a convincing vision of a community, epitomized by the manor and resulting in “a unified human-material sphere” (86).

In later chapters Schmidgen teases out the process of the gradual dissociation of the “human-material sphere.” For him, the dissociation becomes intelligible if not complete when Adam Smith attacks mercantile theories of value. In a particularly ingenious move, Schmidgen asserts that the irruption of modernity in Britain requires “the interruption of a circulatory logic that makes movement across space central to transformation” (142). He finds literary evidence for this interruption in the tableaux of the canonical sentimental novels of the late 1760s and 1770s, which favour stasis over movement and which “begin to produce a world that ... can be reached only through the special exertions of the sympathetic imagination” (147). That Fielding’s *Man of the Hill* already inhabits such a world suggests the uneven development of the productive forces that result in the triumph of the commodity—modern objectification—and the appearance of a subject who is freed from the tyranny of local determinations. Identity or value is no longer tied to a place but rather inheres in the subject or object, sometimes in quite a mystical way.

Schmidgen continues to trace the progress of objectification in his two final chapters, one on Radcliffe’s *A Sicilian Romance* and *The Romance of the Forest* and the other on Scott’s *Waverley*. Objectification results in gains and losses. One such gain, evident in Radcliffe’s work, is freedom from “specifically gendered, oppressive manorial power structures,” which, with English common law, provide support for generally oppressive governance (163). Freedom from these oppressive structures, however, is accompanied by corresponding losses of the communal form that Schmidgen clearly idealizes in his work. Nowhere is that loss more evident than in the elegiac pages of Scott’s novel. In his reading of that novel, Schmidgen shows that even though the Bradwardine manor is restored to its original owner, its restoration depends on the charity of an English intermediary purchaser of the estate. Schmidgen reads the purchase and the restoration of the estate as the sign of a categorical change: real estate becomes like any other commodity, at least in the way that it moves between owners.

What little there is to quarrel with in Schmidgen’s work arises from too much attention paid to theory and too little to practice in a purportedly materialist study. Schmidgen approaches property and property law primarily, indeed, almost exclusively, through the philosophers, the economists, and the great compilers of digests and compendia (including Blackstone). Little can be learned here about actual manors or communal forms, even as they have been given to us by modern historians. Readers are asked to accept on faith the existence of a golden age of plenitude and interconnectedness

epitomized by the manor house. If we deny the premise of a time of plenitude and interconnectedness, however, we are faced with the task of understanding lived experience of communal form in all its richness as it is conveyed by these and other eighteenth-century novels. Here, I think, Schmidgen's work misses an important ideological effect of eighteenth-century fiction. For all his talk of interconnectedness, his pages of discussion of the novels are strangely lacking in representations of life. Part of this absence is a consequence of his choice of fictions. Crusoe (like his creator?) is a nearly pathological isolate, an obsessive builder of fortresses to protect himself from the hostility of others. Pamela makes us feel her isolation too, even when she is put on display before the local gentry or is made a topic of conversation with Sir Simon Darnford. Fielding to be sure is different, but in Schmidgen's reading of *Tom Jones*, too much attention is paid to Paradise Hall and too little to the inhabitants within and without the Hall. In order to "naturalize" Paradise Hall's powers, moreover, Schmidgen mimics the Man of the Hill by reverting to an aesthetic analysis of Fielding's description of the estate. The more one looks for communal forms in Schmidgen's analysis, the less one finds them. Groundedness itself often loses local habitation.

For those willing to accept the premise of Schmidgen's argument—once upon a time embedded meanings and grounded identities characterized human existence—this study offers evidence for one avenue of change. For those unwilling to accept an Arcadian world of plenitude and interconnectedness, which we long since have lost but which we can glimpse in the pages of eighteenth-century fiction, Schmidgen's book still offers some bracing readings of property law, of Adam Smith's attack on mercantilism, and on the relational rather than the objectifying function of description. In the end, in making a strong case for the manor house as a central site of tradition in British culture and fiction, Schmidgen simplifies his picture of that culture. Scott's great contemporary Jane Austen would have provided an interesting contrast to the former's elegiac treatment of a lost way of life. If we take the most questionable of Austen's estate holders, Sir Thomas Bertram, we might even glimpse how the ideological power and function of the manor adapts to changing socio-economic conditions in an age of empire. The Bertrams, at least the greater part of them, may be flawed; Mansfield Park, however, stands for a traditional system of values. Fanny Price's "circulation" from Portsmouth to Mansfield Park transforms her and preserves Mansfield Park. Fanny might even be said to resemble Tom Jones, whose circulation has similar effects on himself and Paradise Hall. In the end, the grand scope of this book leaves it open to exceptions to its claim, but that same scope also gives the book considerable value.

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