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## Reviews/Comptes rendus

Ellen Pollak. *Incest and the English Novel, 1684–1814*. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003. 280pp. US\$39.95. ISBN 0-80187-204-9.

Ellen Pollak's outstanding study challenges two influential accounts of incest and modernity that have shaped contemporary literary studies. The first, modelled on Romantic definitions of desire and literary history, downplays the significance of incest as a cultural concern before the advent of Gothic fiction and Romantic subjectivity. The second, drawing on twentieth-century psychoanalytic and anthropological theories, defines incest as a universal truth unrelated to the contingencies of historical specificity or ideology. That Pollak so successfully debunks both of these accounts speaks to the importance of her book, which certainly will shape future discussions of its subject.

Pollak identifies prose fiction of the long eighteenth century and twentieth-century accounts of human nature and society as part of a narrative continuum with an Enlightenment epistemology that continues to shape our understanding of incest. Pollak reveals how this "ongoing narrative tradition" (11) provides us with access to a number of incest's cultural determinants—its link to political and religious discourses, for example—as well as to the history of a long-cherished cultural myth: that incest is transgressive, liberatory, and universal. Pollak argues the opposite: that both incitements to and prohibitions against incest maintain sexual and racial hierarchies and that cultural attitudes towards incest are as arbitrary and contingent as they need to be in order to maintain those hierarchies. The English novel served, she claims, as the place where an emergent ideology of "natural" gender asymmetries and their attendant incestuous desires found its fullest expression, its influence bolstered by the explosion of print culture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Drawing on Foucault's reading of systems of alliance and discourses of sexuality in the early modern period, Pollak shows how incest emerged as "the model and limit of desire" (15) at a time when an enormous transformation of class and kinship structures was underway in England. In a detailed and engaging history of the relationship between cultural attitudes towards incest and marriage regulations, Pollak places gender, rather than class, at the heart of English developments from Henry VIII onward. Henry VIII's political motivations in seeking a divorce from his first wife in order to secure his succession in the heir carried by Anne Bullen led to fierce theological debates around Levitical marriage prohibitions, debates rendered more complex by the anticlerical tradition (and its political permutations) that informed challenges to religious orthodoxies in the period. Later, these debates were further complicated by the positive inflections granted to natural law discourses by eighteenth-century authors, a reevaluation that allowed incest to appear an affiliate of Nature. Pollak draws on a broad range of archival resources to document this history, including juridical tracts, biblical commentary, and the popular press. Even while tracing the complex and often contradictory logics at work in these cultural debates, Pollak remains focused on the organizing principles at work in the range of discourses she covers: that is, the imperatives of sexual exchange and English national ethnicity. Prior to incest, Pollak argues, is the axiom "that women are the natural sexual property of men" (58). Attendant on this assumption is the belief that, through the traffic in women, English racial purity can be preserved.

Chapters 3 to 7 provide readings of English novels that reflect the close imbrication of incest, desire, and male prerogative. Highlighting the different roles that incest plays in men's and women's social scripts, Pollak analyses Aphra Behn's *Love-letters between a Nobleman and His Sister* (1684–87), reading the novel's critique of the masculine rivalries that structured Restoration libertinism through the lens of the incest narrative that the novel's title announces. Reading against the grain of a critical tendency to celebrate Silvia's incestuous longings for her brother-in-law as subversive, Pollak demonstrates the extent to which the novel's anti-hero, Philander, *uses* the idea of incestuous longing as freedom from patriarchal constraint to tighten his hold over Silvia. Pollak's critical perspicacity comes across in her brilliant analysis of the impotence that Philander experiences as he is poised to deflower Silvia; far from marking a moment of weakness or embodied vulnerability, Pollak suggests, Philander's "impotence" may be a sham that allows the libertine to manipulate Silvia "into accepting the coercive fiction of her own natural desire for him" (70). Rather than granting Silvia any genuine agency of her own, Philander's libertine code simply "reinscribes Silvia's specular status in reciprocal relations between men" (74). Only by parodically inhabiting and rewriting this code can Silvia move beyond the strictures of social control. The novel's interest in tracing Silvia's transformation from victim to agent ultimately diverts the narrative away from its royalist cause; it

is Silvia's personal victory, rather than that of the sovereign over the rebels who supported Monmouth in his bid for the throne in 1685, that becomes the book's *cause célèbre*.

Chapter 4 locates the roots of Delarivier Manley's treatment of the guardian-ward relationship in *The New Atalantis* in post-1688 controversies over the question of national succession and the emergence of a Whig oligarchy under Queen Anne. Tracing the consequences of the transfer of guardianship rights from monarchs to fathers, Pollak notes how the new regime both privileged and threatened those fathers who were required to place their trust in other men; incest narratives emerge, within this regime, as "sites of homosocial struggle in which guardians violate paternal trust by usurping the posthumous rights of fathers over daughters" (92). The crisis of authority that such narratives generated, Pollak argues, created opportunities for the woman writer. Manley's narrative puts to good political use the scandals surrounding the abuse of wards by powerful Whig guardians, enabling the family romance to stand as an allegory for England's shift from monarchical to parliamentary authority under the Whigs. As in her reading of Behn, Pollak demonstrates her ability to illuminate, through her analysis of individual portraits (particularly those of Queen Anne and Manley as minor female wards), a broad range of cultural discourses and practices.

The study proceeds to consider the role played by incest in a range of eighteenth-century novels, offering an extensive reading of Defoe's *Moll Flanders* in chapter 5, as well as shorter readings of *Tom Jones*, *Tristram Shandy*, *Evelina*, and *David Simple* in chapter 6. *Moll Flanders*, Pollak argues, forces its heroine to disown her desire for economic and symbolic agency by confronting her with an impossible choice: circulation or incest. In the end, the narrative offers its heroine consolation for her necessary absorption into a masculine economy at home by granting her the exercise of colonial authority abroad. Incest plays an integral role in this trade-off. In rejecting her incestuous relation with her brother, Moll accepts her lower place on the gender hierarchy; at the same time, incest, by maintaining the biological standard of ethnic "purity," guarantees Moll's racial superiority over the colonized Other. In her reading of the novels that came after Defoe, Pollak traces incest's contribution to the tradition's consideration of licit and illicit forms of sexuality, as well as its representation of the domestic economy's new valorization of affect, and its remapping of kinship onto the private sphere and individual consciousness. These readings appear somewhat truncated compared to the more detailed accounts of Behn, Manley, and Defoe that precede them, but they provide a sense of the different narrative perspectives that the English novel sustained on the subject of incest as the genre took hold of the public imagination. Chapter 6 also introduces its readers to *Eleanora; or a Tragical but True Case of Incest in Great Britain* (1751), a narrative that rewrites a sixteenth-century incest tale, and, in doing so, exposes the dangers of maternal desire and textual production in a culture newly unmoored from traditional forms of authority. The story takes on a pointed

historical specificity in its setting in Cromwell's England, and in doing so engages, Pollak argues, "nothing less than the advent—and threat—of modernity itself" (141).

The different strands of Pollak's commentary come together in the study's final chapter on Austen's *Mansfield Park*. Reading the inflection of discourses of incest and liberty by late eighteenth-century debates surrounding slavery, Pollak offers an account of how the legalization of close-kindred marriages became a means of maintaining strict boundaries between English and African populations in England, even as white slaveholders continued to father children by African mothers on their plantations abroad. *Mansfield Park* reveals a new conceptualization of human subjectivity as inherently incestuous, a notion that both naturalizes gender asymmetries and infuses them with desire, while normalizing ideas of racial purity. Pollak's reading of *Mansfield Park* demonstrates just how much ideological work was required to write these cultural assumptions into stone, exposing the highly arbitrary and contingent status of incestuous bonds, their dependence on the subordination of women, their imbrication in marriage regulations: in other words, their distance from the "primary and foundational" ontology granted them by nineteenth- and twentieth-century discourses (189).

This reviewer wishes Pollak had written a conclusion to her book, so intriguing are the readings of English culture and history that each of its chapters sustains. The study works best, I believe, in its ability to trace political and cultural transformations through the nuanced readings of literary texts; Pollak's eye for the significance of textual detail means that all of her findings respect the complexity of the issues at stake. I was somewhat disappointed to find that, where Behn's, Manley's, and Austen's works are granted the power of critique, exposing contradictions and gaps in the emergent ideologies of the period, Defoe's and Fielding's novels appear only as "occasions for consolidating and naturalizing the contradictory logics of emergent Enlightenment ideologies" (21). To complicate this binary, one could argue, for example, that the humanism Pollak grants Manley is compromised by a healthy dose of the Hobbesian impulse that Manley's narrative loves to project onto the Whigs, rendering its "unruly representation" (103) potentially less coherent as a critique of modernity's imperatives than Pollak suggests. Similarly, one might identify in Defoe's "narrative ventriloquism" (115) a social and political contrariness less amenable to hegemonic instruction than Pollak's reading of *Moll Flanders* allows. At times, Pollak's theoretical rhetoric sounds a little inflated, as when incest becomes "the very condition of epistemological and ontological groundlessness" (141). The term "intercultural" seems contrived rather than illuminating. But these are minor quibbles. Pollak writes with clarity, conviction, and precision; she has authored a brilliant book, and literary studies will be richer for it.

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