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Eleanor Wikborg. *The Lover as Father Figure in Eighteenth-Century Women's Fiction.* Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002. xi + 184pp. US$55. ISBN 0-8130-2453-6.

How did eighteenth-century women novelists negotiate the effects of patriarchy? In search of an answer, Eleanor Wikborg's *The Lover as Father Figure in Eighteenth-Century Fiction* examines novels by Jane Barker, Delarivier Manley, Mary Hearne, Aphra Behn, Eliza Haywood, Jane West, Frances Burney, Elizabeth Inchbald, Ann Radcliffe, Charlotte Smith, Maria Edgeworth, and Jane Austen.

"'Oh author of my being!'—thus Frances Burney ecstatically invokes her father in her dedication to *Evelina,* her first act of public creation" (p. 1). Wikborg's introduction suggests a congruence between female novelists such as Burney and the characters they produced: "many of the stories published by women in the period set an acute need for a father figure's validation against an equally acute need to produce texts, voices, and views of their own" (p. 2). While she apparently finds it convenient to begin with the well-known dynamics between Burney and her father, Wikborg does not develop the argument she seems to foreground: the parallel difficulty for eighteenth-century women novelists and their characters of coming to "authority" within patriarchy. Instead, her focus remains on the male figure within women's novels.

Wikborg's first chapter glances at the theories pertinent to the study of gender dynamics—theories of identity, individualism, subjectivity, gender, sensibility, and incest by Sigmund Freud, Michel Foucault, Juliet Mitchell, Nancy Chodorow, Paul Smith, Judith Butler, Claudia Johnson, G. J. Barker-Benfield, and Robert Polhemus, among others. Crucial to her argument is the recognition of "a performative concept of identity as always in the making" and as not "monolithically interpellated" (p. 4). Her strategy is to outline a flexible taxonomy, to make room for the variety of individual adjustments to patriarchy that she will detail as she tries to encompass the range of women's novels in the eighteenth century. Thus, she admits subcategories and exceptions to the loose groupings of her chapter titles: "The Guardian," "'A Prince of the Almighty's Creation,'" "The Mentor," and "The Ideal Love Relation."

Wikborg succeeds best where she demonstrates that female novelists, working within a patriarchal society, were driven to complex textual strategies—using their novels to subscribe to restrictive gender ideologies and, at the same time, to negate them through disjunctions and contradictions. In one instance, she cites Ann Radcliffe's caution in permitting her heroine to escape in *A Sicilian Romance*: "By shrouding Julia's actions in one of her mysteries that are not cleared up until much later, Radcliffe makes her heroine's deliverance from her father's tyranny appear to be an act of Providence and thereby contains Julia's bold initiative within the feminine role of passive endurance" (p. 37). In another, she points out that incest, if not actually present, is symbolically so in many women's novels, for "to conflate the roles of guardian and lover is a way of probing the incestuous relation in a form made respectable" (p. 20).

Given the chronological breadth of Wikborg's study and the number of novels she considers (approaching fifty), it is not surprising that the nuance of individual works is often lost in pursuit of the categories she develops for male characters. In discussing Inchbald's *A Simple Story*, for example, she focuses on Dorriforth/Lord Elmwood as "an incisive portrait of an archetypal patriarchal figure" (p. 109). Such a description does justice to the moral rigour Elmwood

evinces in some scenes, but undervalues or omits crucial aspects of his character, such as his own mentor-pupil relationship with his fellow priest, Mr Sandford, and the profound psychological and social changes that Elmwood endures when he leaves the priesthood behind and becomes a peer of the realm and Miss Milner's suitor. A similar flattening occurs in Wikborg's discussion of Fanny and Edmund in *Mansfield Park*, when she cites Austen's revival of "the teacher-pupil relation of their childhood" in her conclusion. Surprisingly, she neglects to mention that readers, having experienced Fanny's interior questioning and resistance to several male figures—Sir Thomas, Henry Crawford, and Edmund—are well prepared to receive the "lightly mocking tone" of the novel's conclusion as irony and to see beyond its reductive treatment of Fanny's relationship with Edmund.

Well elaborated, such a reading of male characters in *Mansfield Park* would include some reference to the historical events associated with the French Revolution, which many critics link with Austen's depiction of patriarchy, especially in this novel. While recognizing that the breadth of Wikborg's project does not allow her fully to explore the historical contexts for shifts in patriarchy, one cannot help but wish for more frequent gestures toward the history of ideas. This lack also becomes apparent, for example, in her discussion of Jane West's late eighteenth-century novels, *The Advantages of Education* and *A Gossip's Story*. Rather than considering the effect of the author's rhetorical milieu, Wikborg simply explains that West's male suitors lack passion because the novelist "distrusted" it. An alternative reading would note that for a conservative novelist such as West, writing under the influence of debate over the revolution and the prospect of constitutional reform in England, passion took on a political as well as a gender valence. For West and other anti-Jacobin writers, imagining a placid suitor might seem the first step toward ensuring domestic tranquillity.

On the whole, while Wikborg acknowledges in theory the diversity and range of gender roles displayed in eighteenth-century women's novels, the structure of her argument causes her, if not to essentialize patriarchy, at least to undervalue the nuanced portrayal of individual male characters, especially in their relationships to the historical milieux of their authors. Her strongest argument is reminding us that through their male characters, eighteenth-century women represented a range of possible accommodations, suggested reforms, and imagined resistances to patriarchy.

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