

## Reviews/Comptes Rendus

Karen Bloom Gevirtz. *Life after Death: Widows and the English Novel, Defoe to Austen*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005. 218pp. US\$46. ISBN 978-0-87413-923-5.

Karen Bloom Gevirtz sees the eighteenth century, as have many others, as a time of economic transformation that had a profound impact on all aspects of British life. She argues convincingly, and with admirable clarity, that in the eighteenth-century novel the widow became a locus for articulating the anxieties present in the wider culture about the moral and social consequences of burgeoning mercantile capitalism. Compared to a wife, who had little economic authority, a widow was an independent economic agent, often inheriting a considerable estate or business upon the death of her husband. This power made her a threat to patriarchy, and a frequent scapegoat. Gevirtz supports this claim with research in social history, showing a parallel process in the real world of growing restrictions on women's participation in business, of declining wages for women, and of the waning of many traditionally feminine cottage industries. Novelists provided images of widows as fictional evidence for this exclusion of women from the economic sphere. In particular, Gevirtz makes the case that the flourishing of sensibility within the novel privileged women's affective role. Home and family were women's only proper concerns: "Women could generate wealth, but only by producing Englishmen" (20). Widows, who were sexually experienced but husbandless and typically past childbearing, could not participate in this alternative, subordinate economy of heart and home.

The great strength of *Life after Death* is its impressive synthesis of a vast range of novels, many under-read (for example, Sarah Scott's *The History of Cornelia* and Clara Reeve's *School for Widows* receive serious attention). This catholic approach is helpful in substantiating Gevirtz's claim for the concerted conservatism of novelists of both genders and all political stripes in portraying the widow. She organizes her subject according to economic status and activity, with chapters on affluent, working, poor, and criminal widows. The good affluent widows of eighteenth-century fiction use their wealth charitably, for strengthening communities, families, and friendships. A prime example is the maternal community run by the widows of Scott's *Millenium Hall*, who eschew luxury and their own gain for the good of others. And there are, predictably, numerous bad rich widows who seek their own sexual and material gratification, often at the expense of young heroines; among the better-known examples that Gevirtz discusses are Henry Fielding's *Lady Bellaston* and Ann Radcliffe's *Madame Cheron*. Here Gevirtz charts an increasing discomfort with second marriages

(Charlotte Smith's *Emmeline* and Margaret Lee's *Clara Lennox* provide examples of shunned and abortive remarriage), which she argues is in part an expression of concerns about the appropriate transfer of property: a rich widow must remain single in order to pass on her dead husband's wealth to his children intact. The chapter devoted to depictions of working widows shows how novelists "carefully distance the working woman from the actuality of commerce" (70). Virtuous working widows are always seen to be dependent on male protection, and their economic impulses are cast as maternal rather than competitive—witness Mrs Miller's reliance on Allworthy and her motherly care of Tom. These widows only work from necessity, and their ultimate reward, as earned by Mrs Darnford in Reeve's *School for Widows*, is an escape from the world of work into leisure. Destitute widows, such as the Bath widow in *Humphry Clinker* to whom Matthew Bramble gives twenty pounds, enter fiction only to serve as sites for the exercise of the sympathy and the benevolence of their social superiors. Repaying charity with gratitude and submission, they reinforce social hierarchies. Their antithesis is found in such criminal widows as Moll Flanders, or the Marchioness of Trente from Sarah Fielding's *The History of Ophelia*, women who in their ambition "exemplify attributes of unregulated, emergent capitalism" (136).

*Life after Death* ends with a chapter devoted to Austen, whose fiction is densely populated with widows rich and poor, and here Gevirtz reaps some of the rewards of her wide reading. She argues that Austen's novels show a loosening of the constraints evident in earlier fiction: "Austen's widows consistently complicate old dichotomies with a hybrid of characteristics associated formerly with feudal agrarianism or unstable commercialism" (139). So she can read the officious Lady Catherine de Bourgh as "the aggregate of virtuous affluent widowhood's qualities taken to excess" (145); in her oppressive management of her family and her estate, Lady Catherine is a caricature of the domestic widows of Scott's *Millenium Hall*. Likewise, Gevirtz effectively compares Mrs Ferrars and Mrs Smith from *Sense and Sensibility*; clearly, one is a bad rich widow and one is good, but both use their money to manipulate their male dependents, and neither is punished for it at the novel's end.

Gevirtz unquestionably proves that eighteenth-century novelists (some of whom are, perversely, working widows themselves) are happy to reach for comfortable stereotypes, for the scapegoats readiest to hand. She does not, however, ask what about the novel as a form makes it so hostile to widowhood. Is it, perhaps, that it inherited from romance, along with an interest in courtship and a narrative of generational conflict, a systemic agism? As J. Paul Hunter puts it more charitably, the early novel is "preoccupied with the crises of the decisive moments in

adolescence and early adulthood" (*Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* [New York: Norton, 1990], 43). Certainly Gevirtz's survey shows how novelists treat young widows and old widows differently.

The strengths of Gevirtz's scholarship—her impressive breadth of reading and willingness to engage with less-known novels—make for some rhetorical challenges. There are vertiginous moments as she compares novels written in different modes and at different ends of the century. For all the coherence of its overarching argument, *Life after Death* is most engaging when its author pursues examples that elude the prevailing binaries of good widow versus bad widow: Widow Wadman, who is both desiring and sympathetic in her pursuit of Toby; or Moll Flanders, who plays the roles of widow and wife off one another. Throughout, Gevirtz seems to be looking for a more liberated representation of widowhood, for satisfied and autonomous entrepreneurial widows, unabashedly accumulating and enjoying the goods of this world. Noticing the relative paucity of working widows in eighteenth-century fiction, she remarks "Not so for working men. Male merchants, bankers, surgeons, laborers, peddlers, footmen, valets, guides, lawyers, farmers, innkeepers, gamekeepers, gaolers, bailiffs, sailors, soldiers, musicians, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, mercers, linen drapers, and so on riddle the novel from its inception to the end of the century" (93). She is right in this, but are many of these male characters celebrated as autonomous economic agents? In a figure such as Sir George Ellison we see the same anxieties about avarice and luxury that Scott showed with the ladies of Millenium Hall, the same modelling of selflessness and self-control, the same desire to prove that self-love can be transformed into social good.

Peter Walmsley  
McMaster University

Marshall Brown. *The Gothic Text*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005. 312pp. US\$48. ISBN 978-0-8047-3912-2.

*The Gothic Text* is trained on a single, bewildering consequence of modernity: the astonishing fact of "mind." The modern historicizing school of Gothic criticism has tended to marginalize Immanuel Kant as a peripheral figure who could have had little impact on, and therefore relevance to, the ideological material narrated by the Gothic. In direct opposition to this critical tendency, Marshall Brown meditates on a fundamental consequence of Kantian philosophy: the defamiliarization