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Book review/compte rendu: Ann Lewis, *Sensibility, Reading and Illustration: Spectacles and Signs in Graffigny, Marivaux and Rousseau*

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Abstract

Book review/compte rendu

given that inclusive treatment would have made the volume longer than the tales themselves. That said, the emphasis on the eighteenth-century reception in France and England allows only fleeting attention to other centuries and nations (Spain, Italy, Germany, and Latin America are alluded to in passing). Whereas the nation-state serves as the organizing grid for the discussions of the West, the “East” at times veers between language-based diaspora and monolith, with Jarrar’s essay, for example, asked to embrace Lebanese, Egyptian, Palestinian, and Algerian works. If the volume returns us to the division between East and West, however, it does so with the sense that the term “between” not only cleaves but also connects. The essays collectively seek to engage less in the comparison of set forms across a cultural divide than to depict the extraordinary confluence of cross-cultural influences that bring forth the *Nights* as a powerful and open-ended fiction. As such, these essays present an important methodological as well as literary-historical contribution to the field. In expanding the contexts in which the tales may be interpreted and interrogating the practices and protocols used to master their meanings, the collection invites us to reflect on how the *Nights* have historically been read and to imagine how we might learn to read them now.

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Ann Lewis. *Sensibility, Reading and Illustration: Spectacles and Signs in Graffigny, Marivaux and Rousseau*. Leeds: Legenda, Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2009. xviii+292pp. US\$89.50. ISBN 978-1-905981-96-0.

Ann Lewis undertakes a task of ambitious breadth and depth and of imposing complexity. Breadth and depth are evident in the opening overview and discussion of sensibility, an elusive and controversial term that resonates with emotional attitudes and is linked to moral, aesthetic, literary, and political concerns—with considerable variation both during and since the eighteenth century. Another dimension of breadth flows from the selection of three works as corpus, with a chapter each devoted to Graffigny’s *Lettres d’une Péruvienne*, Marivaux’s *La Vie de Marianne*, and Rousseau’s *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Complexity is inevitable given the need, first, to catalogue and analyze the verbal signs and spectacles (textual images) as well as the visual representations (illustrations) in each of the three works

and, second, to consider the interplay and possible tension between them, for contemporaries and for readers over time to the present day. Lewis has responded to the challenges in a way that shows solid scholarship, balanced interpretation, and useful synthesis.

Attention to scholarly detail is evident in the very physical characteristics of the book. The bibliography is divided into sources published before and after 1800, with useful subdivisions within each set of sources. The footnotes are grouped at the end of each chapter to avoid interrupting the flow of the text; numerous and sometimes lengthy, they provide useful context and references to alternate interpretations. Using the bibliography in combination with the index and the notes, readers can easily trace the threads of discussion, enrich their knowledge of the evolving critical reaction to the various dimensions of sensibility in the works discussed, and deepen their understanding of theories of reader response, a key notion because sentimental narrative has the specific intent of acting as an emotional trigger. Summary tables provide a comparative list of full-length studies since 1986 devoted to “sensibility” and “sentimentalism” (31–33), a list of the illustrated editions of *La Vie de Marianne* (116–20), and details of the various series of illustrations of *Julie* (171–86). A significant number of illustrations are reproduced in the book: five from *Les Lettres d'une Péruvienne*, thirty-six from *La Vie de Marianne*, and twenty-six from *Julie*. On the front and back covers of the book appears a key illustration that is presented and analyzed in the introduction (1–2): “Les effets de la sensibilité sur les quatre tempéraments” (ca. 1767), an engraving by Daniel-Nicolas Chodowiecki. The physical presentation of the book is thus an invitation (simultaneously verbal and visual) to explore its thematic content and approach. The numerous features of the book (tables, illustrations, footnotes, chapter subtitles) condition the reading experience and actualize the main approach: reading this book commands one to pay attention to both verbal and visual elements, to both sequence and fragmentation, and to the syntagmatic axis (how the components function within this particular book) as well as to the paradigmatic axis (how arguments and topoi relate to other critical works).

Balanced interpretations result from a judicious flexibility of approach. Lewis invokes appropriately the considerable scholarly production devoted to sensibility as a genre and literary movement which has been studied within a host of discursive fields (including history of ideas, aesthetics, religion, philanthropy, political economy, physiology, sexuality, and popular culture) (29–30). Her familiarity with recent critical works on iconography, framing, and representation allows her to draw on them to highlight the nuanced and often ambiguous treatment of sensibility by the three authors studied. Lewis chooses to focus on “spectacles” (verbal images in the texts, flagged by the use

of words such as “spectacle,” “scène,” and “image” and experienced as images by characters and by readers) and on “signs” (gestures and other forms of non-verbal communication that are open to interpretation and misinterpretation by both characters and readers). Her intention is not to trace the development of a “genre”; rather, she chooses to focus on the formal verbal elements of these three novels of sensibility and to examine as well the actualization of spectacles and signs in the fixed spatial configurations of the illustrations. Her intention is for her reading of the spectacles and signs in each of the three works to form “part of the chain of differing reactions and interpretations provoked by the same sentimental triggers, whose capacity to incite controversy and powerful emotions continues down the years” (10).

The analysis of spectacles and signs in Graffigny’s *Lettres d’une Péruvienne* focuses on Zilia’s acquisition of “the language of the heart” using non-verbal sentimental communication that remains consistent throughout the novel even after she has mastered the French language. Signs (including facial expressions, sounds, and gestures) in combination with spectacles (artificial images such as paintings, group scenes, framing of characters in mirrors or windows) form part of the literary “metalanguage of sensibility” (57) that would have been easily recognized by contemporary readers. Also analyzed are moments of “beholding,” especially at instances of high emotional intensity or aesthetic absorption, and the concrete forms they take in the illustrations. Through an analysis of both the novel and its “re-reading” in Mme Morel de Vindé’s 1797 continuation, Lewis shows that Graffigny provides a complex treatment of the theme of sensibility that has made possible different readings of the conclusion of the novel. For Lewis, Zilia’s sensitivity to beauty represents an alternative to the pleasures of love; she shows also that throughout the novel Zilia has difficulty “distinguishing and verbally articulating the boundaries between pity, love and friendship” (70).

The problematic relationship between pity and love (and erotic interest) is the focus of Lewis’s analysis of *La Vie de Marianne*’s verbal and visual representations of the topos of “Virtue in distress.” Lewis links Marivaux’s use of seventeenth-century vocabulary to rationalist concepts and shows that the novel admits several interpretations, including that of an attempt to problematize eighteenth-century assumptions about “la bonté naturelle.” In her examination of verbal and visual images, Lewis focuses on the exploration of moral problems resulting from the simultaneous evocation of pity, love, and lust within the general theme of sensibility. Terms such as “sensibilité” and “sensible” are used, she notes, “differently in one context or another, but on many occasions they also surf on the ambiguities of these different meanings, slipping between or connoting simultaneously amorous,

sympathetic or erotic responsiveness: the readiness ‘to be touched’ (88). Her analysis of the illustrations of various editions over time shows their power to condition readers for particular responses; noted as well are opportunities for misinterpretation, as in the case of the highly eroticized illustrations of 1939 by Raoul Serres, a presentation that conforms to the twentieth-century characterization of the eighteenth century as libertine.

The final novel, *Julie, ou La Nouvelle Héloïse*, is an especially rich corpus in which to examine the reading and re-reading of spectacles and signs, particularly in light of the intensity of Rousseau’s writing style, his explicit instructions with respect to the reading of the novel and the Gravelot illustrations, and his acute awareness that spectacles bring imagination, memory, and intellect into play. Lewis shows that on both the verbal and visual levels, reading sentimental topoi hovers “precariously between the innocent, the touching and the erotic” (163). She recapitulates how, despite Rousseau’s insistence on a total and linear reading to reveal the author’s intended moral message, the novel invites partial readings with its internal divisions and with its table of contents that facilitates the selection of individual letters. The verbal images capture key dramatic moments and also serve to create emblematic representations of themes such as friendship, “bienfaisance,” family harmony, and communal joy. These, she argues, “bisect the literary intertextual weave and artistic iconographical tradition” (190). Similarly, an examination of the different series of illustrations reveals that they “interrelate, constituting their own intertextual and iconographic field” (195). Lewis shows how a consideration of the scenes separately or out of sequence (strategies explicitly forbidden by the author) provides a subversive reading that suggests complicity in coercive acts.

While the ambitiousness of Lewis’s project results occasionally in laborious transitions and some seemingly arbitrary decisions, the book provides a detailed and compelling analysis of these three works. Moreover Lewis skilfully combines insights from various fields (literary history, genre studies, theory of representation, reader response) to generate thought-provoking analysis, to provide a nuanced assessment of sensibility, and to suggest additional avenues that warrant investigation.

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