Cheryl Nixon, ed. *Novel Definitions: An Anthology of Commentary on the Novel, 1688–1815*. Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2009. 436pp. CAN$32.95. ISBN 978-1-55111-646-4.

More than any other literary form, the modern novel emerged out of hostility towards its very existence. For most eighteenth-century moralists, novels were trash, poison, or worse: a threat to the bodies and souls of the rising generation. Not surprisingly, the novels of this era bear the mark of this hysteria in their very form: all those anxious denunciatory prefaces, all those claims to a patently preposterous veracity, all those plot lines that carefully track and then veer away from their (supposedly abject) predecessors or competition. Yet it is far easier to round up the usual novelistic suspects for teaching than it is to assemble a decent sampling of their champions and opponents. As a result, those of us who want to give students a sense of how novels worked in the world have had to rely largely on our own cobbled-together collections of such material. Enter *Novel Definitions*, which sets out to do that work for us in a way that has not been an easy option since Ioan Williams's *Novel and Romance, 1700–1800: A Documentary Record* (1970) fell out of print decades ago.

Cheryl Nixon assembles a wide array of fascinating texts, and her collection will probably garner some course adoptions. Many of her selections usefully duplicate Williams's, and the places where she departs from his canon (both chronologically—she starts earlier and ends later—and in terms of emphasis: mid-century women writers loom far larger here) make perfect sense, given the ways in which the interests of the academy have changed over the past four decades.

However, the selections are organized and presented in a way that does not add nearly as much value as the apparatus of a classroom edition should. As a result, the pedagogic utility of *Novel Definitions* will lie primarily in its being a convenient compilation, rather than in anything specific to Nixon's editorial labours. This is a shame (and a significant missed opportunity), but it is a sadly familiar phenomenon these days: for a variety of reasons—some institutional, some personal—classroom editions all too often appear without the benefit of careful proofreading, verification of prior scholars' claims, or even all that much attention to the likely needs of their users.

The most glaring and (at least collectively) most consequential source of frustration in *Novel Definitions* lies in the quality of its annotations, which are, after all, the principal means through which the often alien texts assembled in editions are made comprehensible and compelling to students: annotations are the bridge between the world of eighteenth-century fiction and the world of our classrooms. So it is dispiriting to encounter notes that are incomplete, misleading,

or just plain wrong. Some errors are obvious enough as to be innocuous: for example, the gloss of "Ulysses" and "Achilles" as the "names of the central figures of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, respectively" (153n2) or the note identifying the Daciers as having "translated many Latin classics, including Aristotle's *Peri poietikes*" (110n5). Others are, I suspect, harder to detect and so more likely to do mischief. For example, "the *Innocent Adultery*,' the '*Tears of Sensibility*,' [and] the '*Amours of the Count de D******,'" which George Canning invokes in *The Microcosm* are not, as Nixon suggests, "invented titles that ... evoke and mock those of eighteenth-century novels" (180n1). Rather, they are all real (and the first two are among those which Lydia Languish possesses in *The Rivals*, which is probably where Canning encountered them). Similarly, while I applaud Nixon's decision to have a central "Glossary of Authors and Texts" identifying those figures and works that repeatedly crop up in the discourse surrounding the novel, it is disheartening to find quite basic mistakes in it: for example, Polly Honeycombe does not "almost marry ... the maid's son" (393); she almost marries her nurse's nephew. Perhaps for the purposes of most users this is a difference without a distinction, but surely it is worth getting right nonetheless.

Seth Lerer has argued that error is endemic to academic life, and I am certainly aware that pointing it out at any length, especially regarding anything as supposedly inconsequential as footnotes, risks coming off as pedantic carping. But in an age of full-text databases and other ways of quickly assembling an array of primary materials, the justification for classroom editions is increasingly going to reside in whatever value is added to their contents by the editor, and notes of this sort work against a belief in that value. So too does Nixon's occasionally odd or sloppy treatment of the texts themselves: for example, the "Introductory" chapter to *Waverley* is presented as if it were from the 1814 first edition, but contains a note that Walter Scott did not add until 1829, while the selections from Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* are puzzlingly truncated so as to remove invisibly not only the quotations that illustrate the different definitions (while cryptically retaining the attributions for those quotations), but also part of the definitions themselves: hence a "novel" is here just "a small tale" (169), rather than "a small tale, generally of love." And Nixon's hypercorrection of the completely accurate "But Peace be to the manes of such authors" (156) in number 19 of *The World* to "the [nam]es of such authors" creates a crux where none existed.

Ultimately, of course, these are all local errors, and so, while dismaying in the aggregate, they could all be worked around or corrected on the fly (as most of us routinely do when, say, pointing out a passage to our students), if the more global virtues of *Novel Definitions* tipped

the balance in their favour. Alas, although the more overarching conception driving the edition is not troubled by the same kinds of outright error as the individual selections, it too seems to profoundly miss an opportunity. Nixon, quite understandably, casts her net widely in order to attempt to capture "the popular literary culture of the novel" (16). This strategy offers the benefit of allowing for ready comparison between, say, the opening of book 11 of *Tom Jones* and an essay by Peter Shaw dealing with some of the same issues that came out the next year. But nowhere does Nixon indicate the vastly different place in that "popular literary culture" which these two texts occupied. As a quick proxy, just consider their respective footprints in the ESTC: Shaw's *The Reflector* was reprinted exactly once before the end of the century, while *Tom Jones* reappeared close to eighty times (often in, I suspect, significantly larger editions than *The Reflector*). Quite simply, the odds of a reader's encountering Henry Fielding's "Crust for the Critics" were exponentially higher than those of his discovering Shaw's. This is no reflection on the respective interest of their work, nor a quarrel with the inclusion of figures like Shaw. But to present them as if they took up anything close to comparable space, either real or imagined, in the "popular literary culture" is, in effect, to deny the worldliness of this most worldly of forms. I certainly would not go so far as to suggest that *Novel Definitions* is dangerous in the way that novels were proclaimed to be in the eighteenth century (and it absolutely does provide a convenient compilation of fascinating material), but at both the micro- and the macro-levels this collection, considered as a tool for teaching, is more than a little disappointing. Lydia Languish and her sisters deserve better.

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