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Review of: Virginia H. Cope, *Property, Education, and Identity in Late Eighteenth-Century Fiction: The Heroine of Disinterest*

Abstract
Book review/compte rendu:

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Ready: Book review

the text-play itself just as this text-play helps us out of conventional deadwood attitudes and mental habits" (172) sheds no light on how Joyce's novel may do this while simultaneously giving us, in the revolving of Bloom's mind around Molly with constant affirmation and delight in her abiding singularity, despite his own hurt and pain, the most extraordinary attestation to both the ethical value and artistic fecundity of conjugal love.

As a tool among others, Toker's narratological schema has real but local usefulness. Its strange isolation from the ethical, cognitive, and affective discourses that ought to inform its conceptualization keeps it from escaping naive binary oppositions whose naturalization obscures both the subtlety and poignancy of how the ethical may inflect form in fiction.

Donald R. Wehrs, professor of English at Auburn University, is the co-editor of *Levinas and Nineteenth-Century Literature: Ethics and Otherness from Romanticism through Realism* (2009), has published articles and book chapters on eighteenth-century fiction, post-colonial literature, and critical theory, and is currently working on the relationship between ethics, cognitive science, and literary history.

Virginia H. Cope. *Property, Education, and Identity in Late Eighteenth-Century Fiction: The Heroine of Disinterest*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009. viii+180pp. £50. ISBN 978-0-230-22023-2.

"Disinterest" is a term of multiple meanings and complex history. Defined in the *OED* in one sense as "that which is contrary to interest or advantage," alternatively it signifies "disinterestedness, impartiality," or, again, "absence of interest, unconcern." All of these meanings can be seen as coming into play in the context of the popular eighteenth-century character type that Virginia H. Cope dubs the "Heroine of Disinterest" (identifying the figure most closely with the domestic novel in which the main plot centres upon a contested female inheritance). In the work under review, Cope traces the development of this character type from the proto-example of Samuel Richardson's Pamela to Jane Austen's female protagonists (the end point, she argues, of the Heroine of Disinterest), with middle chapters treating relevant novels by Frances Burney, Elizabeth Inchbald, Ann Radcliffe, and the Godwin-Wollstonecraft circle.

A general aim of the book is to contribute to a growing recognition of the "cultural work" (to employ the author's own phrase) being performed by the eighteenth-century domestic novel. Without denying

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the substance of many feminist objections to the eighteenth-century domestic novel, Cope rightly cautions against a straightforwardly negative reading of its gender politics. Building on the work of scholars such as Helen Thompson, she aims, as she states, "to recover ... forms of [female] agency not immediately recognizable to the modern reader" (4) within the domains of the genre. She identifies the domestic novel as performing "an extraordinary ideological reversal" during the eighteenth century in its "reconstitution of disinterest," formerly "the linchpin of civic virtue in the classical tradition" but increasingly regarded "as impossible, insidious, or, most damningly, irrelevant" (4). By her account, in its "feminization of disinterest" the domestic novel "naturalized a previously unthinkable idea: that the ability to comprehend the greater good, rising above personal and particularly economic concerns, is born out of suffering and economic uncertainty—the province of women rather than of aristocratic men" and "preserved ... virtue as a human possibility by isolating it, like the domestic woman, in the home" (4). As she emphasizes, the value of the Heroine of Disinterest "is determined not by the property she (may) hold, but by her attitude toward that property" (5) and recognition of "property rights as earned rather than bequeathed" (6). As well as the political and ethical dimensions of disinterest, Cope considers its connection to identity and the pursuit of knowledge. Within the process of feminizing disinterest she discovers "surprising correlation" with "the cultural, legal, and intellectual trends that galvanized modernity: the reconceptualization of identity as internal and self-determined; the expansion in concepts of what constituted property; and the exploration of education's potential to transform individuals and cultures" (5).

While Cope's main materials are literary and her book will no doubt be read primarily by eighteenth-century literary scholars, its scope and significance extends much farther, with particular implications for the field of economic history, which the author recognizes has often ignored gender concerns. Indeed, in the course of engaging with eighteenth-century literary history and gender politics, Cope speaks to a wide variety of subjects related to the cultural history of the period. As indicated by her title, she ambitiously draws upon economic, legal, political, philosophical, and educational discourses to direct her literary and feminist analysis. Ultimately, the interest of this work extends beyond the eighteenth century and into contemporary theoretical debates. As many readers will be aware, the term "disinterest" enjoys important currency both in eighteenth-century and contemporary discussions of ethics, and Cope posits a number of suggestive connections between past and present deployments of the term "disinterest," with references, for example, to the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Thomas Nagel.

Evidently, no work of criticism (particularly one as ambitious as this one) can cover every relevant ground to its argument. Even those who accept Cope's reasoning in her decision to focus upon the domestic novel of contested female inheritance might wish for broader contextualization of her argument within the general realm of eighteenth-century fiction, questioning at the very least the deliberate glossing over of eighteenth-century novels of contested male inheritance such as Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* (1749) and Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* (1764). More perhaps might be done to establish that the domestic novel of contested female inheritance did complete its essential trajectory with Austen, as the novels of the Godwin-Wollstonecraft circle succeeded in "stripping the popular story of the well-educated but dispossessed heiress of its power" (138), especially with the explicit acknowledgement that the plot recurs in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Although Charles Dickens's novel *Great Expectations* (1860–61) is cited as representative of the shifting balance from female to male contested inheritances during the Victorian period, there is an obvious Dickensian counter-example in *Little Dorrit* (1855–57), with Amy Dorrit disinterestedly choosing to conceal the revelation that she is an heiress in order to protect the hero from potentially disturbing revelations about his family past. This is not to challenge the essential validity of Cope's observations concerning the history of the novel of inheritance—but rather to note that some points could use further substantiation. One other caveat concerns the disregard for the Stoic tradition, which remained very much in play during the period Cope discusses and which evidently continued to underpin many people's understandings of disinterest. Finally, it is striking, in a work so conscious of word meaning and word history, and which provides important *OED* definitions for terms such as "heir," that Cope looks not to the *OED* but to the Victorian scholar George Levine for an initial definition of "disinterest."

In terms of organization the book is exemplary, as each chapter not only reiterates but also develops the initial thesis in a fresh direction, with particularly significant departures in the third and fourth chapters as the analysis moves "into the radical and Gothic registers" (19). A clear structure enables Cope to manage the multiple strands of her argument effectively—strands that might otherwise have risked becoming overly tangled.

Kathryn Ready is an assistant professor of English at the University of Winnipeg. She has published articles on Hannah More, Anna Lætitia Barbauld (née Aikin), and Lucy Aikin and is writing a book on the Aikin family.