

Scarlet Bowen. *The Politics of Custom in Eighteenth-Century British Fiction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. xiv+224pp. US\$80. ISBN 978-0-230-10354-2.

In a rich and rewarding study of the dynamic relationship between the novel and what she refers to as “customary culture” in the eighteenth century, Scarlet Bowen argues that writers in eighteenth-century Britain mitigated the potentially threatening novelty of the novel by “appealing to custom,” a term she defines as “a constellation of traditional social ideals structured by the delicate balance of reciprocal obligations between patrician paternalism and plebeian deference, the insistence on moral and not market economies, and a tradition of plebeian rebellion in defense of such customs” (1–2). What distinguishes Bowen’s book from other recent accounts of the novel is its focus on the crucial contributions to the fledgling genre made by the plebeian orders’ staunch defence of tradition in the name of custom. Although she does not wish to “deny the genre’s imbrications in modern developments,” her intention is to “restore a sense of the novel’s cultural, social, and temporal hybridity as eighteenth-century writers call upon values and cultural forms of the past to mitigate the future” (2). Bowen’s study takes its place alongside those that have also offered an alternative history of the novel form by resisting the premise of the genre’s wholesale absorption into other narratives of rise—of the middle class, of feeling, or of the possessive individual. Bowen’s study thus reminds us, in a new key, that eighteenth-century novelists were not nearly so wedded to novelty and innovation at all costs, and had, rather, a much more complex connection to tradition. In contrast to the still pervasive association of the novel with expansion in multiple senses—capitalist, imperialist, historical, psychological—Bowen calls attention to its equally powerful claim to movements backward rather than forward, to tradition rather than progress.

With chapters on Daniel Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*, Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*, Tobias Smollett’s *Humphry Clinker* and William Godwin’s *Caleb Williams*, Bowen’s study hews closely to well-known novels by well-known novelists. The one exception is a brief but illuminating chapter on fictionalized memoirs of female soldiers, which examines Christian Davies’s 1740 *Life and Adventures* (1740) and *The Female Solider; or, The Surprising Life and Adventures of Hannah Snell* (1750). Arguing that plebeian identity, female masculinity, and British nationalism intersect in complex ways at mid-century, Bowen suggests that the “plebeian female soldier,” a “figure at once masculine and feminine” invokes and “refashions notions of Britishness during a period of history when its identity was most in dispute” (82).

The chapter on *Pamela* is the strongest because it departs from accounts of Pamela’s virtue that understand it entirely in terms of a

sexual economy. Making wonderful use of *Pamela's* conscious invocation of a robust tradition of ballad literature and arguing that "Richardson's heroine shares a richly detailed ancestry with the heroines of popular balladry" (60), Bowen usefully marshals E.P. Thompson's assertion that "plebeian culture is rebellious, but rebellious in defense of custom" (*Customs in Common*, 9; cited in *Politics of Custom*, 63) in order to argue that "virtue in Pamela connotes a very particularized idea of merit derived from customary social relations" (63). Pamela's "resistance" to Mr B. is less a matter of her moral or sexual purity than it is a question of the "reestablishment of proper paternalistic treatment of the lower orders" (63). The sheer fact of Pamela's rebellion "in defense of custom" tends to be obscured in feminist critics' accounts of how Pamela's steadfast resistance to her master is a sign of her bodily self-possession and thus her modernity. Bowen's view is a salutary corrective to the historical record, without sacrificing what is modern about Pamela.

Throughout the book, Bowen is admittedly more interested in the workings of plebeian culture than anything else. Her understandable desire to correct a scholarly overemphasis on polite and commercial modernity, and by extension on the middle and upper ranks of social, political, and cultural life in studies of the eighteenth-century novel, does lead to some occasional difficulties. In a discussion of *Moll Flanders*, for instance, Bowen suggests that a "driving force behind Defoe's customary portrait of lower-class affiliation" is "the vulnerable position of poor and laboring people" which points to the "need to impose moral constraints on the anarchic energies of a free-market economy" (24). What Bowen neglects to mention is that conceptions of moral economy that incorporate checks on the excesses of capitalist accumulation are already well-established in contemporary discourses of civic humanism. The exclusive focus on custom as seen through the lens of plebeian life has a tendency to skew some of her observations.

In the final chapter on *Caleb Williams*, Bowen's attempt to rescue Godwin from charges of elitism by recuperating the sympathetic elements of customary culture in the novel strains against the complex linkages within late eighteenth-century discourses of the civic and of custom. As John Barrell and others have argued, the customary is what comes to be attractive to landed wealth by century's end because it is the only available language for representing all forms of change as threatening—the discourse of civic and republican virtue having been partially appropriated by a democratic and radical movement championing inalienable rights. Arguing that "Godwin searched for the emancipatorist potential of custom as part of his gradualist vision" (137), Bowen misses an opportunity to deal with the fact that from the language of a modified classical republicanism, not custom, comes the

possibility of “emancipationist potential” and an attendant framework of rights. Custom has a broader and more multifaceted meaning than Bowen sometimes allows for here. Her book is more about the cultural politics of custom than its politics. Are there costs, moreover, to aligning plebeian life so unequivocally with customary culture? Is it efficacious to position the plebeian orders as entirely hostile to change as such, and what impact does this have on later, nineteenth-century understandings of working-class enfranchisement, and its precise organization according to a desire for social and political transformation? I pose these questions less as criticisms and more as promptings, and as a response to the engagement and rigour that Bowen brings to her material.

Bowen has valuable things to say about customary culture and the novel in her significant study. Lucidly argued and elegantly written, Bowen’s study offers fresh readings of several novels that enhance a substantial contribution to a growing scholarly literature on popular culture and the novel in eighteenth-century Britain.

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Tilottama Rajan. *Romantic Narrative: Shelley, Hays, Godwin, Wollstonecraft*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. xxx+282pp. US\$65. ISBN 978-0-8018-9721-4.

Tilottama Rajan’s *Romantic Narrative* challenges a number of traditional divisions in the study of the literature of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: poetry and prose, male versus female, high and low culture. Intellectually stimulating, theoretically sophisticated, and deftly argued, this book presents the kind of work that we have come to expect from Rajan’s archive.

At the outset, Rajan outlines three general aims: “First, it offers a theory of narrative, or rather, of a ‘narrativity’ opposed to the disciplinary apparatus of the Novel, where the word *Novel*, with a capital *N*, signifies a sociopolitical institution ... on whose normalizing role in the public sphere critics from Jürgen Habermas to Clifford Siskin have written. Second, ... this study questions the association of narrative with what Peter Brooks calls ‘reading for plot,’ which derives from a unigeneric reduction of narrative to the (Victorian) Novel. And finally, it reflects on what the category of Romantic narrative can tell us about disciplinary issues raised by historical study that are of particular urgency at this point. These include the role of poetry versus prose as epistemic practices in an emergent modernity and the place of Romanticism itself within a reorganization of knowledge that has subsumed it into a ‘nineteenth