

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



**Tiffany Jo Werth, *The Fabulous Dark Cloister: Romance in England after the Reformation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011). ix+234 pp. ISBN 978 1 4214 0301 4.**

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Tiffany Jo Werth's study of romance writing in post-Reformation England argues that the genre provided Protestant writers with a welcome platform to discredit Catholicism and its addiction to the supernatural. Concentrating on a small number of canonical texts, including *The Faerie Queene*, *Arcadia*, *Pericles*, and *Urania*, it relies, for its first half, extensively on textual traces that suggest parallels between hagiographic accounts of religious wonders and an active reversal of these traditions that put the romance tradition in closer contact with more realist modes of writing. The second half turns to issues of reading.

During the first two chapters, which focus mostly on romances by Sidney and Shakespeare, John Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* plays a crucial role. Werth suggests that it provided Protestant readers with an alternative narrative logic to Catholic hagiographies, turning supernatural saints into realistic martyrs. At times, though, the rhetorical connections between particular stories of saints in Catholic publications and the way individual romances echo particular tropes or symbols feel a little strained. Indeed, the way in which Werth's study assumes that the manner in which early modern romance relied on the supernatural was a particularly Catholic tradition seems strangely unhistorical in a scholarly study that otherwise relies so extensively on contextualization. When 'the romance heroine' is rendered as dependent on 'her reliance on the supernatural marvelous' (p. 92), one may wonder to what extent this goes back to Catholic (or even Christian) conventions, rather than continues in the Greek textual tradition of such works as Heliodorus's *Aethiopica*. The desire to link pre-Reformation romance with Catholicism even detects 'Catholic motifs' (p. 108) in the classical Greek work by Heliodorus, whose connection to Christianity is dubitable.

While Protestant-Catholic tensions surely found their way into the narrative developments of the early modern romance, the larger generic tradition seems a little too marginalized in the first two chapters of this study. What they forcefully demonstrate, though, is a late Renaissance development within romance texts to replace the excessively fantastic with events that already anticipate the eventual turn, within the history of the novel, towards a more realist mode of representation.

As the second half of Werth's book shows, the Protestant-Catholic tension contributes only one piece of the puzzle. This second part, also consisting of two chapters, turns towards the question of reading. While much of the criticism on early modern reading is productively evoked in these chapters, the theoretical underpinnings connected to reception aesthetics are left mostly untouched, with the recent turn to cognitive models entirely missing. In particular some of the earlier criticism could have added productively to the argument, for instance Stanley Fish's work in *Self-Consuming Artifacts* (1972) on seventeenth-century fiction. Werth in fact alludes to Fish's central notion when she muses about 'a self-reflexive reading experience' as it develops with (late) Renaissance readers (p. 98). When she concludes that romances often left it to the discretion of their readers to see moments of 'iconophilia or iconoclasm' (p. 95), she works within poststructuralist views of reading that, at least since Roland Barthes, have inspired reader-response theories. Notwithstanding this, Werth's analyses offer numerous helpful insights. For instance, she discusses reading in *The Faerie Queene* through historical sources from Tasso to Harington, nicely recreating the Renaissance discourse (pp. 106–7). The discussion of Harington's paratextual commentary in his translation of *Orlando Furioso* also demonstrates a productive engagement with early modern reading strategies in that it frequently abstracts from the textual material, offering insights into the early modern understanding of how fabulous moments relate to questions of both religious doctrine and generic self-fashioning as they meet in moments of philological exegesis. What is at stake throughout Werth's study is the role played by allegory in an interpretative situation where poiesis and mimesis struggle over the proper use of realism in early modern fiction.

In the strongest chapter in this study, on Spenser's romance, Werth for the most part does away with the focus on Protestant/Catholic narrative modes and instead offers a convincing argument about the role of the reader in Renaissance romance. It shows how a more critical reader is textually nurtured, one who is willing to move beyond the fabulous fare of medieval fiction and on towards the growth of a more rational approach to reality. While avoiding discussions of Enlightenment discourses, Werth nevertheless repeatedly stresses how readers benefitted from 'the use of reason and sober judgment' (p. 115), intellectual developments that foreshadow the profaneness of a later age. The

focus on formal and readerly aspects in Spenser reinforces this, with the attention paid to the various purposes of paratextual features and proto-narratorial glossing further suggesting that this romance poem contributed significantly to the formal history of early modern narrative as well. Freed from its religio-centric straight-jacket, the study here makes its most impressive contributions to the history of romance, charting as it does the manner in which *The Faerie Queene* invented and shaped readerly expectations as they related to generic matter. What Werth demonstrates convincingly is that these conventions were essentially unstable, waiting for the kind of generic consensus that, with the eighteenth-century rise of the novel, would then provide both aesthetic and readerly guidance. In pointing at the very late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, mostly in her final chapter on Wroth's *Urania*, she contributes significantly to the history of romance and the role it played in shaping narrative prose fiction.

In this concluding chapter, the importance of literary history once again supersedes that of religious history, with Werth admitting that in this text 'religious polemic is more subtle' (p. 158). The Protestant-Catholic problem indeed fades to the background, and the overarching question of how romance writing changed during the period under investigation takes centre stage. A major concern is the manner in which characters approach passions, signalling towards the anticipated 'godly reader of romance' (p. 142), namely one who manages to control those passions as they arose in response to the reading of romances. Often, the solution seems to lie in some sort of curative practice, for instance connected to a magical water cure. (Readers may easily be reminded here of Catholic doctrines of transubstantiation.) As the supernatural thus returns to romance writing, Wroth nevertheless emphasizes that something beyond these magic rituals is necessary: storytelling and narrative, and the acts of listening and reading connected to them. This oblique nod to the Socratic method and its (Bakhtinian?) dialogic nature once again evokes the deeper history of romance writing and its involvement with pre-Christian narrative modes. Similar connections could have been followed up through other channels, for instance in connection to the frequently evoked discourse about (love) melancholy which, as Marion A. Wells has forcefully shown in *The Secret Wound*, goes back through neo-Platonic writing to Greek and Arabic sources.

The focus on the history of romance also occasions one of the closing statements of this study, where the author notes that the writers discussed in the individual chapters 'lessened the pejorative hegemony' connected to (Catholic?) romance, allowing it to become 'a genre capacious enough to be both continuity for and catalyst to English culture after the Reformation' (p. 159). This strong statement about the role of a

particular genre comes as a little surprise, given that the overall emphasis so far had been on how romance as a mode, in the tradition established by Barbara Fuchs, surfaced in rather different generic traditions and contexts. Yet what this terminological slip might productively point to is the very establishment of a genre from the modal ancestry that formed its breeding ground. Seen this way, Werth's carefully argued and lucidly written study offers a highly valuable contribution to the history of the genre/mode that has been known as romance/novel, and which clearly went through a stage of self-invention during the sixteenth and seventeenth century.

### **Works Cited**

- Fish, Stanley, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972).
- Fuchs, Barbara, *Romance* (New York: Routledge, 2004).
- Wells, Marion A., *The Secret Wound: Love-Melancholy and Early Modern Romance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007).