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Discourses of Desire: Gender, Genre, and Epistolary Fictions by Linda S. Kauffman. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1986. Pp. 288. $29.95 cloth.

If I had to describe *Discourses of Desire* in a single word, that word—not surprisingly—would be French: *passionnant*. This text analyzes desiring subjects as they script desire across epistolary forms. In the process *Discourses of Desire* binds the reader in the very kind of passionate embrace of the word (as sign of love, passion, hope, and loss) that characterizes the texts under its scrutiny: Ovid's *Heroides* and the letters of Heloise and Abelard, the Portuguese nun, Clarissa Harlowe, Jane Eyre, the governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, Rosa Coldfield in *Absalom! Absalom!*, and the three Marias of *The New Portuguese Letters*. Kauffman's thesis turns on the relation between letters and literature, between gender and genre, to argue that the love letters under consideration both conform to generic boundaries and challenge those boundaries, submit to literary conventions and revolt against those conventions:

> What are the so-called laws of gender and laws of genre, and what is the connection between them in so many disputes—about legalities, authority, the proper name, identity and difference? What have these disputes to do with forms of discourse that explore power and desire? The reasons differ, but in all the texts in my study passion is transgressive, woman is disorder, and discourses of desire are repressed. Their speakers are literally exiled or imprisoned or metaphorically "shut up" —confined, cloistered, silenced. . . . Transgression lies in telling, for each discourse in my book combines writing and revolt, defiance and desire. The writing is the revolution. (pp. 19–20)

These issues have for some time concerned American feminist critics working in the genre of epistolary fiction. Kauffman's work builds on that of Nancy K. Miller, Ruth Perry, and Peggy Kamuf, but its theoretical bases are to be found in the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Roland Barthes, and Jacques Derrida. Against Elaine Showalter's charge that "Franco-American theory has gone much too far in discounting the importance of signature and gender in authorship," Kauffman shows the ways a traditional genre (the epistolary) and a particular author (Ovid, for instance) question mimetic forms, examine the implications of signature, and "expose the artifice involved in critical perceptions of gender" (p. 21).

Epistolary forms are examined from the perspective of rhetorical norms, and her text moves back in time from exemplary eighteenth-century texts to the Ovidian tradition that they incorporate and question, and forward to *The Three Marias*, which rewrites the disputed claims of *The Letters of the Portuguese Nun. Discourses of Desire* works a large canvas, and—to its credit—also examines its individual texts in excruciating detail, reliving the passion and pain that bring each text into being. Kauffman's text replays the moves across time that each of her desiring subjects makes. She argues that amorous epistolary writing begins in loss, registering its effects and measuring its pain

against the power of a previous moment when lover and letter writer were united. Thus this genre begins in *fiction*, occasioned by the retrospective gesture of *recounting* in the effort *to account for* the betrayal that occasions the letters.

Epistolary fiction, then, always maps itself across time—the longed-for past; the hoped-for future; the absent present—and anticipates in its writing the retrospective nature of its reading. The heroine "is defined by the lover she addresses; she "always locates herself—spatially, temporally, emotionally—vis-a vis the beloved" (p. 35). Her writings are predicated on the absence of her lover and sustain the illusion of his presence: the woman is gendered in her abandonment; the male is gendered in his escape from the bonds of fidelity, constancy, and devotion. The binary oppositions of female/male, letter/literature, absence/presence, signifier/signified, textual/corporeal are all problematized by the demands of the genre: the fiction rests on the notion that letter and lover are one; absence is presence; past is future; writing is living; ink is blood, etc.

Kauffman argues, finally, that the modern novel develops from amorous epistolary discourse, a subgenre of the epistolary that traces itself back to Sappho. She demonstrates the ways in which the "dialogue between the writing subject and addressee" extends beyond the borders of the letters themselves to engage the entire tradition of amorous discourse. Indeed this diachronic dialogism defines the genre for Kauffman:

> thus Ovid, like Catullus before him, invokes Sappho; Heloise invokes Ovid; the Portuguese nun's letters reiterate those of Heloise; *Jane Eyre* is a subtext in *The Turn of the Screw;* and the process continued through the reaccentuation of the *Portuguese Letters* in *The Three Marias.* Desire is infinitely transcribable, yet ultimately elusive, and is therefore reiterated ceaselessly. Dialogism implies not just double (or multiple) languages and dialogue but another *logic*—one that, as we shall see, distinguishes Ovid from Virgil, Heloise from Abelard, Clarissa from Lovelace, and so on. (pp. 23–24)

This tradition ceaselessly turns back on itself (with a difference) just as the letters that form this epistolary chain forge from moments of rupture the fiction of their own discourse. The women writers of this tradition write as a means of structuring and restructuring their personal histories, declaring themselves against the risk that they will be lost to memory: I write; therefore I exist. Of particular interest to Kauffman's argument are the ways in which women who are the heroines of this genre have risked erasure and effacement from the history of its forms, not only forgotten by the lovers to whom their letters are a call to remembrance, but overlooked by readers and critics who have examined the history of the novel form. The interest displayed by *Discourses of Desire* in the publication histories of its various works, the relation between fictional discourses and "real" letters, desiring forms and discursive forms, are not extraneous to its "proper" subject. It has a vested interest in demonstrating the revolutionary potential of a single form, where the desire of the subject is not merely the *subject matter* of the text but directs the very creation of the text. Amorous epistolary fiction turns

the passive cultural artifact of amorous abandonment (the woman who waits) into the active subject of a discourse that overturns cultural expectations (the woman who writes). And just as the heroines of amorous epistolary discourse perform the work of a subversive politics, "undermining mimesis, by transgressing the boundaries of both gender and genre" (p. 23), Kauffman herself performs an important critical task by tracing the modes of epistolary subversion, showing how the revolt *within* the letter takes place. *Passionnant, répétons-le.*

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The Old French Fabliaux by Charles Muscatine. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986. Pp. 220. $24.00.

In his recent book, Charles Muscatine addresses the century-old debate on the relationship between themes and social context in the fabliaux that began with Bedier's positing their bourgeois origins. In *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (1957), Muscatine agreed that these tales are examples of the realistic tradition associated with the rise of the bourgeoisie, but the same year, Nykrog published his influential work that argued for the aristocratic origins of the genre. Although much disputed by major critics, Nykrog's influence has been quite persistent, and Muscatine reopens the issue, broadening it from a focus on origins within a class to origins in a cultural climate of the thirteenth century. Although he had earlier claimed that these baudy tales were not mimetic but realistic in the sense of their preoccupation with the animal facts of life, a basic premise of his new work is that they should be taken seriously "as evidence for the history of medieval sensibility" (p. 2). Since they express sexuality and other appetites so candidly, he maintains that they offer glimpses of everyday life and should not be interpreted as either moral lessons against concupiscence or as temporary aberrations, holiday license in the Bakhtinian sense, from the dominant morality. He believes that their ethos represents a subculture of hedonism and materialism that coexisted with Christian morality and courtly gentility.

The chapter, "The Social Background," elaborates on a previously published article in which Muscatine lays out his argument that the audiences for these tales must have been mixed and that the social attitudes they represent are not simple. With ample details from the texts, he shows how settings are mixtures of cities, towns, and rural areas; he discusses the persistence of country metaphors to show the close ties between country and city; and he points out the number of characters representing all social classes including even a few sympathetic *vilains* to counter Nykrog's theory that they were uniquely flattering to the aristocracy. The mixture of social classes, settings, and language do not, for Muscatine, mean that social issues are paramount but that we should not consider one class or another as either the origin or the audience of these tales. For him, the social evidence underscores their hedonism and shows that "a web of materialism" implicated bourgeois and aristocrat alike.

The heart of his argument, "The Fabliau Ethos," surveys the fabliau's preoccupation with food, drink, sex (so prominent that he devotes a subsequent chapter to it alone), and money. Noting the numerous examples of delicious repasts prepared for lovers, coffers of jewels exchanged for sexual favors and other examples of the "hedonistic materialism" so pervasive in these texts, he briefly alludes to cleverness and wit, the means used to achieve these pleasures. The prominence of both successful outcomes for clever protagonists and the explicit references to the value of practical intelligence lead him to the conclusion that their ethical system ignores conventional morality. He maintains that the didacticism of the fabliaux, expressed in their frequent morals and proverbs, is conventional and usually unconnected to the plot. He implies that the audience would take the moralizing for granted as part of their habitual way of thinking, and not be bothered by the incompatibility. But later he points out that there are a few exhortations to virtue and that "the stated wisdom of the fabliaux is thus overwhelmingly practical, and worse" (p. 103). For him, the fabliau ethic simply co-exists with the dominant Christian one.

In the longest chapter in his book, Muscatine argues that the sexuality and obscenity of the fabliaux reflect broad cultural attitudes of normal enjoyment of sex. He rightly points out that Nykrog was forced to defend his theory of their courtly origins despite the pervasive evidence of frank and even obscene language by saying that some nobles enjoyed vulgarity and others did not. Muscatine rejects as well psychoanalytic explanations of sexual humor and assumes that the humor depends primarily upon the normal difficulties associated with sexuality and the taboos regarding expression of sexual topics in a given culture. For him, the fabliaux reveal that the people of the time did not take seriously Christian injunctions against finding pleasure in sex and thus what seems obscene is not for shock value. He details at some length the words used for genitalia and disputes Nykrog's assertion that fabliaux authors either avoid an opportunity to be vulgar or use euphemisms. As Muscatine points out, a synonym is not necessarily a euphemism, and all of the synonyms used for sexual parts and acts represent a large range of connotations. To defend his own point that the attitudes are quite normal, he mentions the absense of extended descriptions common in classical pornography, the conservative sexual postures, and the range of attitudes on female sexuality which are not necessarily anti-feminist; "for women as for men, sex is naturally desirable because pleasurable. It is something to get and enjoy, like food, wine, or money. The fabliau audience manifestly has among its accepted values a lot of room for a relatively unselfconscious, axiomatic, direct pleasure in sex" (p. 124).

He does admit that the fabliaux also include examples of sadism and scatology which he implies are less normal or at least more offensive to modern readers. The issue of their language is for him an historical one; certain words became obscene because of the rise of the courtly style and the realistic, frank words of the fabliau reflect both an earlier, unselfconscious attitude toward sexuality and an anti-courtly bias similar to Jean de Meung's continuation of the *Rose*. Again, it is a question of a set of values that co-exist with dominant courtly and Christian ones. Their language was made to seem more vulgar as courtliness became more dominant.

Muscatine's conclusion is that fabliaux should be taken as evidence of medieval cultural history, that their ethos is "rooted in a deeply human taste for material goods and sensory pleasure, for food, drink, and uncomplicated sexuality" and that, due to the coherence of their attitudes and values, the genre constitutes more than a random collection of jokes. Their attitudes predate both Christian and courtly ethics and persist into the contemporary American culture. What Muscatine seems most to want to prove is that their meaning does not necessitate a "contrastive" reading, i.e., we do not have to see them as anti-clerical or anti-courtly, they have their own integrity. The sex is enjoyed as innocent sex and the trickster as trickster. By refusing to read their meaning in a contrastive sense, Muscatine feels he can distinguish fabliau humor from that in other genres and texts, such as Richeut and Renart stories that may utilize similar themes but depend on other traditions for their humor. Likewise, he can reject a Bakhtinian analysis by saying that their humor is not marginal or predicated on major cultural festivals as their counterpoint, as Carnival is dependent on Lent. He concludes with three reasons we should take these texts seriously—the sheer numbers, the importance of their attitudes as part of the human condition, and the unfortunate tendency to undervalue them due to an Anglo-American Protestant ethic that finds them offensive and our own discomfort with the cultural complexities they seem to present.

Muscatine opens his final chapter with the phrase, "Apart from providing a general introduction to the genre" which is a good description of his work. It is clearly written, a nice example of literary history and neo-Aristotelian criticism in its emphasis on theme, plot, and attention to diction. He eschews all recent theories of criticism in general and ignores much of the stronger criticism on the fabliau in particular—aspects of his work that seem all the more surprising because it is published by Yale. One of his most valid points is that a certain ethos dominates these tales which is not anti-Christian, anti-feminist or anti-bourgeois. But he is not the first to mention this. The discussion of social background is well researched, but concludes very weakly. To correct what has been perceived as the close identification of the fabliaux with one social class, Muscatine substitutes the whole culture (or a subculture) and tries to normalize their language and values.

Normalizing their values must have been a struggle for him. In 1976, Muscatine decried the dominance in our culture of "unabashed materialism" that he calls the fabliau ethic, and states that in the thirteenth century "the social inferiority of one secular system to another was not yet so clear" (*Genre*, 9, p. 18). Since so many in the thirteenth century were implicated in the same values, he concluded "something ethically serious and defensible [was] woven into these frivolous and often indefensible tales" (p. 19) because people used this ethic to "rise" economically to a courtly level. From this negative perspective on their value (both ethical and literary) he has moved to a more generous attitude, overcoming, perhaps, "the Anglo-American Protestant ethic" that resisted their power. His approach is a refreshing corrective to past moralistic criticism, but his selective use of their "realism" places him with the great nineteenth-century critics who never questioned their own assumptions about mimesis. Without even considering the objections that would be raised by post-structuralists (see Howard Bloch's *The Scandal of the*

Fabliaux), I think he should have taken into account the natural distortions and exaggerations inherent in comic forms; and finally, I think he has not sufficiently addressed how and why the meaning (the ethos of hedonism and materialism) is revealed formally through the didactic frame and irony.

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Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth-Century England by John Bender. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987. Pp. xviii + 337. 72 illustrations. $29.95.

In *A Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724–27), Daniel Defoe noted that London had "more publick and private Prisons, and Houses of Confinement, than any City in *Europe,* perhaps as many as in all the Capital Cities of *Europe* put together." According to Defoe's count of 27 prisons, 119 sponging houses, 16 madhouses, and unnumbered houses of detention, "like little Purgatories, between Prison and Liberty," London had more places of confinement than churches.

The ubiquitous eighteenth-century prison was also a prominent social institution. Contemporary accounts of prisons acknowledged that the inmates, who were not subjected to isolation, constituted their own societies with their own hierarchies, customs and rules. The initiatiory "garnish," or a new prisoner's being fleeced to buy drinks for the other prisoners, is only the best known of the prison's social rituals. The jailers themselves, like the notorious Thomas Bambridge, warden of the Fleet, relied for much of their income on the prisoners in their charge: extortion was a fact of life in the jail. Social factors such as these caused some prisoners as much frustration and misery as the sentences handed down by the courts. Those sentences could be barbaric and exaggerated, but our tougher ancestors were apparently well equipped to survive the physical hardships and rigors of a prison regime. But then in practice the rigors were not always particularly harsh: early in the 18th Century many prisoners in Newgate were allowed freedom roughly similar to England's "open prison" system today, with access to local amenities such as taverns outside the walls of the prison itself. Besides, with corruption as rife in jails as in government (a frequently noticed parallel), it was often possible for a prisoner to bribe his way into a relatively comfortable existence.

Isaac Ware's 1738 translation of Palladio sounded a rather different note about the institution of the jail: "The prisons may be made healthy and commodious, because they have been instituted for the safe-keeping and not for the torment and pain of criminals, or of other men." Until the reformists, led by John Howard in the 1770s, began to do something about the physical and social conditions in English prisons, penal institutions were anything but healthy, if relatively commodious. The most notorious of all English prisons, "*Newgate,* considered as a prison," wrote James Ralph in 1734, "is a structure of more cost and beauty than was necessary, because the sumptuousness of the out-side but aggravates the misery of the wretches within: but as a gate to such a city as *London,* it might have received considerable additions both

of design and execution, and abundantly answer'd the cost in the reputation of building." Ralph meant Old Newgate, which was replaced by George Dance the Younger's heavy, forbidding exterior design (1768), which looked like a fortress, and so still managed to convey something of "the misery of the wretches within." If New Newgate was a gate to the city, it was no mere boundary marker, but a conspicuous reminder of a society's undiminished fondness for locking up criminals and suspects. The "sumptuous" exterior of Old Newgate did nothing to suggest an intimidating regime, nor much else to suggest the function of a prison as a place of punishment by deprivation of liberties. But the intimidating exterior of New Newgate represented the legal, judicial and social regime that enabled the prison to exist at all, and threatened anyone who thought to step out of line. Dance's design conveyed a new way of thinking about prisons, since one direct result of the thinking behind prison reform was the idea that punishment should make the individual inmate socially assimilable, that is, fit to step back into line. As the eighteenth Century advanced, punishment thus became a means of moral and religious improvement more than a form of physical abuse or an opportunity for a jailer to make a profit. The architecture of the places of detention also changed, though not in any crassly parallel way. The new English prisons, as Robin Evans has shown, were designed to "fabricate virtue." The goal of reform was to reform the prisoner: the penitentiary was to be a place of penitence, a social institution controlled by an institutional ideology.

The ideological causes of these changes, and the processes by which they were articulated, are John Bender's subject in this densely annotated, richly illustrated, handsomely produced book. Bender traces the rise of the penitentiary as a consequence of the ideology that created the reformist movement, and connects it with the "novelisation of discourse," a phrase guaranteed to quicken the pulse for followers of Bakhtin, who looms everywhere in Bender's book. However, in concocting a critical recipe of new historicism with a flavor of Marx via Williams and Jameson, plus a dash of Foucault, Bender distances himself cautiously from his methodological influences, so that if they ever go out of fashion, he presumably will not. Underneath the methodology is a thoroughly worthwhile argument that is really quite straightforward: novels express ideology, which creates particular kinds of prison. Put another way, novels and prisons (especially the internal regulation of prison life) are both expressions of an ideology of institutionalised control. With help also from Jeremy Bentham, Bender argues that the novel and the penitentiary are "fundamentally similar social texts" (p. 36). The lack of formal parallels between the two genres can easily make analogies seem contrived, and at first one's heart sinks as Bender sets out his thesis with a marked preference for parallels and analogues to identifications, but then the body of the book shows that the common ground between novel and prison is an emergent ideology of institutional authority: there is no facile identification to be had, so Bender does not waste his time looking for one.

If there are contrivances in the argument, they are to be found not in the core of the methodology but occasionally in individual readings: for instance, Defoe has plenty to say in *A Journal of the Plague Year* about incarcerating infected people for their own and society's good, but the parallels with prison reform would be more convincing if reformers could be shown to be thinking

of criminals as sick. But other readings are full of insights: for example, the island "prison" becomes salubrious and reformative for Crusoe. As Bender takes us through selected works of Defoe, Gay, Hogarth and Fielding to show how narratives assert the value of authority—indeed, assert authority —the novels do not emerge in a dazzling new light that will change our conceptions forever, but they do emerge as material products of a culture that expresses authority through structured narrative.

It would be uncharitable as well as unfair to complain of a narrow focus to such an ambitious book, yet I have misgivings about its scope. The relatively narrowly defined topic of the penitentiary and its design precludes discussion of *Colonel Jack*, whose narrator has plenty to say about judicial punishment and thus, albeit crudely, anticipates the debates that led to reform. That novel has just as strong a claim to inclusion as *A Journal of the Plague Year.* I question Bender's range again when he stylishly elucidates the subversiveness of *The Beggar's Opera* on the compelling evidence of its portrait of authority, including Walpole's, as corruptly self-interested. Of course, this "Newgate pastoral" is a natural choice for discussion, but its subversiveness is shared by a wide range of contemporary writing that has little or nothing to do with Newgate (*The Dunciad, The Craftsman, Gulliver's Travels),* and so to identify Gay's "total irony" too closely with prison culture tends to make the *Opera* seem more unusual than its wider cultural implications really suggest. The culture itself is one which places high value on the power of regulation. Because, in Bender's terms, Gay and Hogarth practise "essentially novelistic techniques of realism and generic contradiction" (p. 89), they raise questions about the relationship between narrative and regulation: seeing the techniques that way, Bender recognizes far more than just commentaries on prisons, but there is a danger here of isolating particular texts for special treatment only because they use prisons as constitutive metaphors.

Neither Gay nor Hogarth imagined a culture that was conspicuously regulated: in their work the potential forces of regulation keep running into resistance. The result is a messy place like Gay's Newgate, full of contradictions that would be unexplained if they were not so transparently and miraculously solved by Gay's most ironic creation, the author. Bender interprets this kind of strategy (though in the following quotation he is actually discussing Defoe) by recognizing that it is an assertion of the individual self: "To have a self," he writes, "is to take individual narrative account of the regulating, discriminating forces that control the chaos of human nature just as they display and order the abstract grid of the metropolis" (p. 80). This is surely right (except that the last phrase does not apply very aptly to London), and as bourgeois Britain asserts the individualism of the self, the ideology of control can be expressed in at least two culturally consistent forms: the novel that organises, like *Tom Jones* with its controlling narrator, and the prison that puts individuals in places where their spatial relationship with a controlling overseer is minutely regulated. The paradox of this, Bender argues, is that a conception of self in such a chaotic, crowded society does not resist control, but instead comes to depend on representations of authority.

At the heart of the ideology lies the gathering of information and its organization into a structured narrative, controlled not at the point of retrieval but at a central or superior location. Control is the domain of the novelist and

prison supervisor alike. Narrative is deployed as Fielding deployed it in his dual capacities as magistrate and novelist: "as an authoritative resource" (p. 139), concrete rather than symbolic evidence of his authority. Bender places more emphasis on this authority than on the resultant Panoptical concept of uniformity among those who are subject to control. He also neglects corrupt political interest and class as having much to do with the social formations that arise out of an ideology of control.

Because *Imagining the Penitentiary* focuses on the novel, Bender needs discourse to be novelized but, like authority, the discourse was being centralized, and so the novel may be a more marginal genre than this study permits it to be. Nonetheless, by placing narrative within the ideology of control, Bender has made a welcome contribution to our reassessment of the rise of the novel.

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