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# TEMPERING ROMANCE

Katherine R. Larson

*The Fabulous Dark Cloister: Romance in England after the Reformation* by Tiffany Jo Werth. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011. Pp. 248, 8 illustrations. $65.00 cloth.

When John Milton sets out in *Areopagitica* (1644) to defend the freedom of the press against Parliament's 1643 Press Ordinance, he advocates confrontations with seemingly seductive texts as vital opportunities for moral reform:

> 'Tis next alleg'd we must not expose our selves to temptations without necessity, and next to that, not imploy our time in vain things. To both these objections one answer will serve . . . that to all men such books are not temptations, nor vanities; but usefull drugs and materialls wherewith to temper and compose effective and strong med'cins, which mans life cannot want.[1]

Reading widely, he argues, fosters the interpretive acuity required to inculcate virtue. Romance is not an explicit focus of his argument here, but clearly Milton sees the genre, conventionally associated with vanity and temptation, as an obvious target for licensers. Warning of the difficulty of silencing musical instruments across England, for instance, he imagines the acoustic "lectures" produced by village fiddles and bagpipes as rural alternatives to romance reading: "[T]hese are the Countrymans *Arcadia*'s and his *Monte Mayors*."[2]

Romances like Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* (1590, 1593) and

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Jorge de Montemayor's *Diana* (1559) may have constituted "recreations and pastimes"[3] that were inherently suspect, but they were also integral to the didactic tempering that Milton associates with reading "promiscuously"[4] and well. Elsewhere in *Areopagitica*, he lauds Edmund Spenser's Sir Guyon for modeling discernment and moderation, and he concludes that readers should grapple vicariously with Mammon and the Bower of Bliss so that they too might "see and know, and yet abstain."[5] In his capacity as a writer of romance, Spenser constitutes for Milton an exemplary "teacher"[6] of active readers who are challenged to demonstrate their virtue and to discern truth as they are drawn into Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590, 1596) and navigate its tempting landscapes alongside Guyon.

In *The Fabulous Dark Cloister*, Tiffany Jo Werth probes the Janus-faced attributes of romance reading that inform Milton's argument in *Areopagitica*. The romance was demonized in the aftermath of the Reformation as an inherently Catholic and effeminizing genre that led readers astray. Yet Werth demonstrates that Protestant writers sought to harness its affective power for edifying purposes. As such, the romance emerges in Werth's compelling analysis as a distinctly "hybrid" (2) genre that registers the transitional nature of the post-Reformation period through its ability both to tempt and to temper readers. Bridging Catholic and Protestant practices, the four romances featured in this rich study—Sidney's *The Countesse of Pembrokes Arcadia*, Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*, William Shakespeare's *Pericles* (ca. 1607), and Lady Mary Wroth's *The Countesse of Montgomeries Urania* (1621)—contributed to the ongoing religious and cultural reform of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries even as they reveal considerable ambivalence about those changes.

Given the "self-reflexivity advocated in Protestant modes of reading" (101) and the related tenet of *sola scriptura* (by Scripture alone), it is not surprising that seemingly secular texts and the interpretive practices of their readers likewise became "fraught catalysts for—or against—faith" (5) in the post-Reformation period. Werth innovatively structures her book so as to foreground this dynamic and implicitly transformative relationship between text and reader. In part 1, "Fabulous Texts," she examines the vilification of the romance genre in the light of the slippage between the moralizing miracles extolled in biblical parables and the potentially damning supernatural feats of secular romance. If both narrative models were widely recognized as holding the power to move readers and auditors, how might romance writers

deploy these affective tools to help mold pious readers? Werth begins to probe this question in chapters 1 and 2 as she considers how Sidney, Spenser, and Shakespeare rework romance's familiar wonders for instructive and virtuous ends. All three of these writers rely on their readers' memory of romance conventions and recognize the appeal of wondrous narratives as didactic devices that stirred readers to new knowledge. However, they evoke and reframe expected supernatural and hagiographic motifs in order to foreground "nonmagical revelation" (51).

Particularly noteworthy here is Werth's examination of the reformed romance heroine in the *New Arcadia* and *Pericles*. Sidney's account of Cecropia's imprisonment of Pamela and Philoclea critiques the fraudulent sorcery so often associated with Catholicism and with women in the romance tradition while also providing a distinctly Protestant reworking of the "the powerfully redemptive figure of the female saint" (61). Sidney "pul[ls] the curtain on Crecropia's theater" (69), highlighting the material and rhetorical foundations of her machinations even as he acknowledges the duplicitous potency of her illusions. His critique of Cecropia as a fraudulent Catholic manipulator contrasts sharply with his depiction of the imprisoned Pamela and Philoclea. Werth convincingly argues that Sidney relies on a "hagiographic palimpsest" (75) in his representation of the sisters, transforming them from saints into Protestant virgin martyrs as he emphasizes their patient suffering, their chastity, their rhetorical astuteness, and their fervent loyalty. Even as he builds expectations for supernatural intervention in his account of their sufferings, he undercuts that possibility by consistently accentuating the sisters' endurance and faith. As Werth argues, "Pamela and Philoclea's triumph over Cecropia signals how a new generation of romance heroines might outshine their sorcerous and Catholic-tainted predecessors, thus appropriating the old modes for new ends" (80).

A similar tension, at once suggesting and disrupting hagiographic models, animates *Pericles*, a play that enriches Werth's study by querying the generic boundaries of the romance, even as its own troubled textual history helps to highlight the elusiveness and hybridity that Werth sees as hallmarks of the genre. Situating Ephesus as a site that mediates, in often contradictory ways, between "the condemned elements of Catholicism" (83) and Protestant reform, Werth persuasively teases out the hagiographic and miraculous dimensions that inform Thaisa's resurrection in act 3. Marina, in contrast, recalls Pamela and Philoclea in her reliance on her own rhetorical skills, rather than on supernatural

intervention, as she reforms the brothel's patrons and, later, restores her father in a very different resurrection scene. Surprisingly, Werth does not address the significance of Marina's prowess as a singer in her consideration of the redemptive impact of Marina's "rhetorical performance" (92). Given the centrality of music within Reformation debates, Marina's songs warrant consideration alongside the "medium and modes of storytelling" (94) that drive the conclusion of this deeply musical play. Taken as a whole, Werth's reading of the *New Arcadia* and *Pericles* testifies to romance's capacity to mediate—like the geographical site of Ephesus—between past and present, capitalizing on the affective appeal of conventionally Catholic wonders even as it reframes them in Protestant terms.

Whether such textual reformation succeeded, of course, relied on the readers of romance who were, like the genre itself, feminized and vilified by prescriptive writers. These "Superstitious Readers" constitute the focus of part 2. Bringing together ongoing debates in early modern studies concerning the passions, memory, the gendering of reading, and textual affect, Werth considers how the reworking of romance motifs in *The Faerie Queene* and *Urania* might in turn generate reformed interpretive practices among readers. Anticipating the work of contemporary cognitive theorists, early moderns recognized that "what and, especially, *how* we read" (98) stimulate the passions, thereby shaping behavior and memory. Because romance was associated with especially powerful—and implicitly gendered—affective forces, it constitutes an ideal genre for considering this formative relationship between text and reader. Werth convincingly argues that Protestant writers worked to channel the seductive power of romance in order to teach readers interpretive acuity and discipline. Those features of the genre typically condemned by didactic writers emerge in her analysis as crucial tools for the training of godly readers.

Spenser situates the audience of *The Faerie Queene* in precisely these terms, telling Raleigh, "[T]he generall end . . . of all the booke is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle discipline."[7] In chapter 3, Werth probes the strategies that Spenser deploys to craft this consummate individual. On one level, Spenser's readers are taught to read well by witnessing Guyon's interpretive lapses. The didactic framework that Werth unpacks here is crucial for our understanding of book 2. However, given her emphasis on the somatic effect of reading—and indeed on the vital intersections between gender and genre in the book as a whole—more could be done with the fact that much of

what Werth describes as Guyon's "reading" in this chapter is actually his interpretation of bodily gesture and behavior. If, as Werth suggests, "one reads and falls through the body" (98), how does Guyon's reading *of* bodies connect with the textual reading practices that are the focus of this study?

Spenser also inculcates interpretive discipline in his audience through the guidance and the textual cues of the Palmer. Werth brilliantly situates the Palmer as a "personified Genevan gloss" (123) whose function is not only to direct Guyon safely towards the Bower of Bliss but also to model "active, reasoned, reading" (127) for Spenser's wider audience. Werth's reading aligns Spenser's romance with a broader practice of textual glossing that would have held decidedly Protestant resonances in the late sixteenth century. *The Fabulous Dark Cloister* is regularly enriched by material examples that evoke the romance's palimpsestic nature—the architectural ruins of monasteries, redecorated rood screens, and the silhouettes of excised embroidered images—but Werth's elucidation of Spenser's Palmer through the lens of religious print culture is especially strong.

Turning to Mary Wroth's *Urania*, Werth deepens her focus on the gendered facets of romance's production and reception. This final chapter opens up important space for women as astute readers—and innovative writers—of romance, while also shifting away from individual reading practices to emphasize communal models of interpretive and creative reform. All of Wroth's works are invested in the question of how best to express, and ultimately to govern, one's passions. Over and over again, her female protagonists gather in secluded spaces to share their poems, songs, and stories with one another. These processes of creative self-expression and textual exchange are themselves crucial vehicles for self-discipline, even for characters like Antissia, who ultimately fails to control her desires. But Wroth's impassioned protagonists are also transformed through discussion and judicious interpretation of their stories. Like her uncle, Wroth undercuts the need for supernatural intervention in *Urania*, foregrounding instead "a community of readers who help to puzzle out and determine what constitutes good behavior" (159). In so doing, she offers a new model for women's engagement with the stories integral to the romance genre, transforming her female protagonists from "passive recipients of a magic process" into active participants "in hermeneutical exercises usually denied them" (151). Urania stands as an exemplary figure in this regard. An unconventional romance heroine, she assumes a role akin to

Spenser's Palmer as she counsels her companions—both male and female—to cool their passions.

Wroth's characterization of her female protagonists also holds broader implications for her readers' confrontations with romance. If the disordered Antissia and the disciplined Urania "provide contrasting templates for how readers might respond to romance" (151), Wroth's Pamphilia epitomizes the struggle that any reader faces when striving to subdue passions excited by an encounter with a seductive text. Pamphilia is not simply a reader, however. Whether inscribing poems on trees or singing songs, Pamphilia repeatedly turns to writing and storytelling as ways to master her passions. In so doing, she manifests the active "labor" (157) required of romance readers while simultaneously drawing attention to *Urania*'s rewriting of romance conventions. As the romance develops, Wroth thwarts generic expectations not simply by denying supernatural wonders but by depicting her protagonists succumbing to physical vulnerability and to age. Pamphilia, meanwhile, emerges by the end of part 2 as a "self-possessed" (156) heroine, successfully regulating her desire for Amphilanthus even as she—like Urania—takes a leading role in communal narrative settings. Anticipating Milton's medicinal metaphors in *Areopagitica*, where he situates suspect texts as "usefull drugs and materialls wherewith to temper and compose effective and strong med'cins,"[8] Pamphilia's creative and emotional trajectory suggests that close encounters with romance might ultimately be a "preventative occupation" (157) for women. Radically reframing "the rhetorical triumvirate of Rome, its Babylonian whores, and their fabulous stories," Werth situates Wroth's *Urania* as an important "textual site for the performance of exegetical skills" (158–59) that validates women's—as well as Wroth's own—interventions within and resultant transformation of the genre.

None of the romances—or indeed many of the individual episodes—featured in Werth's book offers reassuring closure. Both Sidney and Wroth leave their tales unfinished. Although ostensibly destroyed, the unforgettable Bower of Bliss lies smoking, its ruins still visible; *The Faerie Queene* as a whole concludes on an ambiguous note, the Blatant Beast uncontained. *Pericles*, meanwhile, already a decidedly hybrid text, struggles to reconcile "the very different worlds of Ephesus and Mytilene" (93) in its concluding scenes. As such, these "bafflingly piecemeal and strangely abortive" (161) works register their anxious status as cultural and religious mediators on structural, as well as interpretive, levels. Their deferrals and ambiguities underscore the challenge

and the ambivalence surrounding the reformation of romance, even as they testify more broadly to the "difficulty of reforming a culture" (131). They are, ultimately, exceptional textual palimpsests that reveal as much about the continuity and slippage between Catholic and Protestant traditions in post-Reformation England as they do about the reformation of reading practices during this liminal period.

Werth's book concludes, fittingly, with a Palmer-like injunction to her readers: "[R]ead, puzzle over, and interpret" (164). Recalling *Areopagitica*'s invitation into the "dust and heat"[9] of textual encounters, her command encapsulates the active, dynamic relationship between romance texts and their readers that lies at the heart of her study. *The Fabulous Dark Cloister* offers fresh insight into the didactic significance of the romance as a tool for individual temperance and cultural reform and highlights the importance of attending to literary genres as "bearers of historical meaning" (3). In so doing, it pushes its own readers to emerge from their encounter with Werth's astute analyses as more discerning interpreters of these wondrous texts.

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NOTES

1. John Milton, *Areopagitica*, in *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, 8 vols., ed. Don M. Wolfe et al. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), 2:521.
2. Ibid., 525.
3. Ibid., 523.
4. Ibid., 517.
5. Ibid., 516.
6. Ibid.
7. Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. Thomas P. Roche Jr. (London: Penguin Books, 1978), 15.
8. Milton, *Areopagitica*, 521.
9. Ibid., 515.