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Comedy Means Never Having to Say You're Sorry

Jordan Alexander Stein
University of Colorado at Boulder, Jordan.A.Stein@colorado.edu

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Harm's Way: Tragic Responsibility and the Novel Form by Sandra Macpherson. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. Pp. 237. $55.00 cloth.

Harm's Way takes issue with the one thing everybody knows about the novel; namely, that it is a vehicle—indeed, the vehicle—for the rise of bourgeois individualism. Famously outlined in the 1950s by Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) and enriched since the 1980s by Marxists, feminists, and Foucaultians, this dominant story aligns the English novel with the development of psychology, the rise of companionate marriage, and the actualization of modern personhood—in short, with what *Harm's Way* designates succinctly as the "interiority thesis" (16). But the only thing more succinct than *Harm's Way's* designations is its dispatch. In five short chapters, the book makes an impressively bold and impeccably graceful case against the idea that the realist novel can and should be considered the vehicle for which it has so long been taken.

Instead, *Harm's Way* argues that "[t]he realist novel is a project of blame not exculpation" (13). Unfolding from this claim is an intervention into the ways that critics of the novel have been oriented to the idea of action. *Harm's Way* contends that the widely accepted view that characters drive plots through their actions (a view that grants agency to human figures and so complies with the interiority thesis) is ultimately a "comic" orientation, exemplified in the sentimental novel that terminates in marriage. The book accordingly

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shows comedy to be a narrative form of limited liability, such that the responsibility a character assumes (and should assume) for her or his actions is tempered by subjective issues, including things like intention, moral disposition, or states of affection and desire. In comedy, good intentions cancel bad actions (and thus comedy, the book notes in a typically and wryly stylish moment, "means never having to say you're sorry" [15]). Alternatively, *Harm's Way* posits a "tragic" orientation to action in the novel, in which character is "an *effect* of the action" (8, emphasis retained) rather than the other way around; or again, in which "character happens to and does not usher from persons" (174). This formal point manifests in narratives of strict (as opposed to limited) liability—narratives which assume that "interior" issues such as intention or the goodness of a person (or character) are irrelevant to the formal condition of harm that persons (or characters) may produce. Far from recognizing persons for their interior depths, *Harm's Way* shows that strict liability recognizes persons as "causes *rather than* agents," "matter in motion," (165, 23, emphasis retained). But, ultimately an argument about responsibility, the book assures its reader that "if this is quite literally dehumanizing, it is not, therefore, inhumane" (23).

While *Harm's Way* grants out of hand that strict liability is not evident in all eighteenth-century British novels—that it is, in fact, "a liberal countertradition" (4)—the book's wager that accounts of strict liability are present in texts as foundational to the study of the English novel as *Moll Flanders, Roxanna,* and *Clarissa* leaves one wondering how "counter" this tradition can ultimately be. And that, surely, is the point, as *Harm's Way* proceeds by handling the most apposite case studies (e.g., Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding) in the most strikingly counterintuitive ways. To be sure, the book opens up new readings of familiar texts by Defoe and Richardson, but the standout example is the third chapter on Fielding, whose *Joseph Andrews* and *Tom Jones* conform so well to the book's understanding of the comic version of the realist novel, and contrast so strikingly with Richardson especially, that they are used to demonstrate the book's claims in reverse. The unusualness of this move makes it worth pausing over, for nearly a fifth of *Harm's Way's* narrative is devoted to the rigorous discussion and ultimate assimilation of texts that, avowedly, do not themselves prove its point. If few arguments would attempt such a daring turn, many fewer could sustain it as well as this book does, and even a reader who could somehow fail to appreciate the theoretical reach of the book's claims or the deftness of its close readings could not fail

to admire the sheer fearlessness of the book's style of argumentation.

A final chapter on Frances Sheridan's *Memoirs of Miss Sidney Bidulph* pushes the argument's feminist implication, "to uncouple harm from nonconsent" (146). Such an uncoupling demonstrates that one can be "impelled" to an action that one then performs and for which one is therefore responsible, without having needed to make a conscious choice or to express something about one's self. This relatively simple point has startlingly complex implications, underscored by the dicey example of male rape, where bodily gameness is often recognized as equal to consent. And while an erection may not, of course, necessarily be a sign of consent, *Harm's Way* takes a different track, arguing instead that consent is irrelevant not just to rape but to sexual activity of all kinds. Advancing the position that one is "responsible for what he cannot help but have done" (150), *Harm's Way* assigns responsibility to all who happened to be party to a harm, victim and perpetrator alike, regardless of what anyone wanted or meant to do. The strict assignment of responsibility for action in this chapter ties together prior threads of argument (that Roxanna is in part responsible for the death of her daughter; that Clarissa is in part responsible for her rape) in order to show that this accounting for responsibility—"We are responsible, though we are not at fault" (49)—offers a radically formalist way of reckoning a politics (and an ethics) of gender equity. The novels under discussion, like the legal logic of strict liability with which they contend, show us that "[i]n exchange for the exigencies of embodiment, literature offers the compensations of form" (174).

If such claims sound unlike any one may elsewhere have encountered in a field as densely populated as the history of the novel, that innovation is entirely to *Harm's Way*'s credit. But though I sincerely admire the book's creativity and accomplishment, though I am certain that anyone working in the field will have to contend with it, I admit that I hesitate to feel entirely persuaded by it. Without a doubt, the book's wonderful readings do have me convinced that strict liability is far more of an intellectual context for the eighteenth-century British novel than I ever might have thought. But the political dimension of the argument, the idea that intentions ought to be irrelevant to actions, I am slower to accept. As it develops this point, *Harm's Way* rather heroically argues that its unyielding theory of responsibility—and the aesthetic formalism that, the book also demonstrates, aligns with strict liability—generates a powerful counterargument to forms of privilege grounded in the body (specifically, in sex and species), and I certainly find this

visionary move to be an attractive one. However, perhaps what makes it attractive, rather than persuasive, is the absoluteness of its presentation. The lockstep alignment of the book's terms are entirely compelling within the book's argument, but not as plausible when one considers examples on which the book's argument does not touch. It is difficult to imagine, for instance, that texts like *Pamela* or *Robinson Crusoe* depict characters as causes rather than agents. While *Harm's Way* may wish to classify these as comedic texts, rather than tragic ones working through a logic of strict liability, it nevertheless seems to me that the strongly Christian motifs in these novels, which develop and reward the refinement of interior states, are also legible in a more clearly tragic novel like *Clarissa*. And though I suppose that the presence of strict liability in *Clarissa* does not preclude the possibility that the text is simultaneously concerned with other means of imagining action, one does not get the sense reading *Harm's Way* that it is possible to have a lenient account of strict liability.

Be that as it may, there is no conclusion one can have about this book other than that it is the finest kind of literary criticism—remarkably lively, thoroughly researched, cogently argued, and brilliantly counterintuitive. And generous. For as we engage seriously with the book's argument about strict liability, we might happily discover that we too are perhaps responsible for something this truly great.

Jordan Alexander Stein teaches English at the University of Colorado at Boulder.