

“New Critical Approaches to the History of the Early English Novel”

Sonia Villegas López
Universidad de Huelva

The critical appraisal of the rise of the novel in English has changed drastically from the publication of Ian Watt’s homonymous study in 1957. Some thirty years later, one of Watt’s disciples, Michael McKeon, suggested a new model to study the origins of the novel as a genuine type of prose fiction which was influenced mainly by Italian, French and Spanish sources, and which began earlier than the texts written by the eighteenth-century ‘fathers’ of the genre, namely Daniel Defoe and Samuel Richardson. Following McKeon’s model built around ‘questions of truth’ and ‘questions of virtue’, which nonetheless missed some remarkable (female) precedents of the novel tradition, other critics like Josephine Donovan, Paula Backscheider, Ros Ballaster and Janet Todd, among others, have been in charge of rescuing these texts, claiming their influence in the development of the genre. To illustrate their critical approach, and to stress the relationship between former and foreign sources and the incipient –and autochthonous— form of the novel in the late seventeenth century, I will use some examples extracted from Behn’s fiction.