

There remains an enormous amount of work to be done on Frye's papers (which Hart points out fill thirty to forty metres of shelves) and Hart, like Robert Denham, has helped to prepare some of the ground. The most useful future studies of Frye will be those that isolate and offer a new perspective on one aspect of his work, as Hart's later chapters do.

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Diane Elam. *Romancing the Postmodern*. London: Routledge, 1992. pp. 206. \$69.95.

We are all familiar with efforts in recent years to postulate commonalities between postmodern thought and the social and aesthetic values of past writers and philosophers. Indeed, the MLA annual bibliographies assemble a steadily proliferating catalogue of studies devoted to Shakespeare and deconstruction, Cervantes as a metafictionist, Milton and the postmodern, the postmodern Kierkegaard, Joyce and poststructuralism, and so on. *Romancing the Postmodern* falls into this category of endeavor. As its title implies, Diane Elam's book is a kind of mutual illumination study that seeks a better understanding of both the romance and postmodern theory by identifying ethical and epistemological values the two hold in common.

For Elam, romance is the "signature" of the postmodern (2). It would seem that the success of her project will depend in large part on her ability to define romance in a relatively coherent, relatively compelling manner. Yet clarity and coherence of definition are not the author's aims. Citing Derrida's well-known essay, "The Law of Genre," Elam argues that romance is a genre that is marked by "excess" and hence that it does not permit generic codification in the conventional sense. She characterizes attempts to define romance as "modernist." ("Modernist" and "modernity" are her terms for positions marked by substantialist or essentialist biases and stand as antonyms for "postmodern" and "postmodernity.")

Though an "excessive" genre, romance (inevitably) holds a few basic attributes in Elam's view. In its preoccupation with the subjective and relativistic, romance stands in contrast to realism which deals with ontological fixities. Romance is a peculiarly feminine form preoccupied with small-scale and often domestic narratives. In her view, both romance and feminism are peculiarly attuned to human temporality and serve as exemplary models for the analysis and understanding of history. She goes so far as to assert that "within postmodern romance the figure of the woman is what allows the work of remembering to be performed" (16). According to Elam's reading, the romance has enjoyed little prestige within the family of novelistic subgenres and, as we see in scholarly attitudes towards popular romances

such as those put out by Harlequin, has often been dismissed (though, for some reason, Elam will offer no detailed discussion of the popular romance in *Romancing the Postmodern* and no consideration whatever of the medieval romance). It is her intention to elevate the genre to its appropriate level of prestige among literary forms. And, because both postmodernism and (her construction of) romance maintain relativistic notions of historical truth, she will claim that the romance is the quintessentially postmodern literary genre.

The critical readings advanced by *Romancing the Postmodern* look at a variety of novels and fall into two categories. The first and last chapters consider contemporary works—in the former instance Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and in the latter, Derrida's *La Carte postale* and selected fictions by Kathy Acker. The intervening three chapters analyze novels by Walter Scott, Joseph Conrad, and Scott and George Eliot. In her discussion of *The Name of the Rose*, Elam focuses on the tension between Eco's ironic postmodern treatment of genres and history and his sexist (and hence) un-postmodern handling of female possibility. In chapter 5—the most philosophical and most original of the book—Elam looks at a variety of gender-related issues that come up in *La Carte postale* and Acker's feminist punk fiction: epistemology, gender identity, human agency, seduction, gender and violence, etc.

The readings of nineteenth-century English fiction that are elaborated in chapters 2 through 4 are thoughtful in their way, but it is not immediately clear why essays dealing with, variously, social caste in Scott's historical novels, imperialism in *Nostromo*, and the depiction of gender relations in the novels of Scott and Eliot are included in a book whose stated focus is a feminist critique of postmodern romances. Elam emphasizes the questioning of traditional beliefs that Scott, Conrad, and Eliot accomplish—counter-intentionally in the instance of Eliot's overt "realism." She associates such critique with anachronism—the violence of "natural" chronology, of received truth—and sees anachronism as a defining aspect of the postmodern. Consequently, for her, Scott et al. are postmodernists *avant la lettre* or, because the author claims postmodernism is not merely a late twentieth-century phenomenon, postmodernists *tout court*. It is at this point that the liability of Elam's decentered theory of the (postmodern) romance manifests itself. If this form includes all literary works that contest accepted notions—whether directly, as in the case of Scott and Conrad, or indirectly, as with Eliot—then it would be hard to find a work of fiction that is *not* a "postmodern romance." Then, for example, a stinging realist critique of romance and romantic attitudes such as that advanced by Flaubert in *Madame Bovary* would become, however improbably or paradoxically, a postmodern romance.

In an 1888 letter to Margaret Harkness, Engels praises Balzac's depiction of class conflict though he readily acknowledges that Balzac was an apologist for the *ancien régime* (Baxandall and Morawski

114-16). More recently, Angela Carter welcomes the frank portrayal of misogyny and, well, sadism in the novels of the Marquis de Sade. In each case, the critic uses analytical reasoning to illustrate how a text turns (or can be turned) against itself and the biases of its author. (The contemporary term for this is "deconstruction" but the gambit is as old as Zeno.) There is nothing inherently postmodern about Balzac or Sade or, for that matter, about the sort of interpretive move made by Engels or Carter. Nor is there anything inherently postmodern about either George Eliot's depiction of gender relations or Elam's interpretation of it.

While we find excellence in *Romancing the Postmodern*, it is an excellence of the parts rather than of the whole. The book reads like two monographs rather than one. The first, comprised of the introduction and chapters 1 and 5, contends with postmodern works from an overtly feminist position while the other, chapters 2 through 4 examines the privileged themes of postmodern liberalism, gender, class, and empire—though not race—as rendered in certain nineteenth-century English fictions. In her 1988 dissertation, Elam examines these same themes in novels by Scott, Eliot, George Meredith, and Conrad. *Romancing the Postmodern* seems to be a not entirely successful attempt to yoke together her dissertation and other research. One final thing needs to be noted. This book deals with traditional polarities like essentialism-relativism, modernity-postmodernity, realism-romance, and male-female but does a kind of binary "flip," privileging what it construes as the historically-rejected Other. The danger of endorsing traditional dichotomies—whatever the politics of our valorizations—is that we may simply repeat structurally inscribed reductions, rather than contest them, that we may write yet another "realist" melodrama and not a true "postmodern romance." Of this danger, we must be wary.

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#### WORKS CITED

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Cheryl Turner. *Living by the Pen: Women Writers in the Eighteenth Century*. New York & London: Routledge, 1992. pp. ix, 261. \$16.95.

True to its capacious title (shared in part by Dale Spender in her 1992 edition of articles on early British women writers), Cheryl Turner's *Living by the Pen: Women Writers in the Eighteenth Century* traverses a wide literary, cultural, and economic landscape in its exploration of the