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Review of Zunshine, Lisa, Bastards and Foundlings: Illegitimacy in Eighteenth-Century England

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Lisa Zunshine. *Bastards and Foundlings: Illegitimacy in Eighteenth-Century England*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005. xi + 228 pp. \$44.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8142-0995-0.

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Britons Learn to Appreciate a Real Bastard

Despite the breadth implied by its title, this book focuses on the representation of illegitimacy in eighteenth-century British fiction. Lisa Zunshine, a professor of English at the University of Kentucky, argues that the ubiquity of bastards and foundlings in the literature of the time provides more than mere titillation or comic diversion. Instead, “the fictional treatment of bastardy was increasingly subject to a system of unspoken cultural conventions” (p. 6), the most important of which reflected the unease of the well-to-do middle class over the prominent fact of illegitimacy and society’s efforts to cope with it. The larger aim of her “insistent cross-referencing between the historical and the literary,” she states, is “to put illegitimacy on the map of eighteenth-century studies as a crucial fixture of the period’s imaginative landscape” (p. 21). This is an easily attainable yet demanding objective; there is no doubt that illegitimacy occupied a place in the cultural vocabulary of the reading classes, but the “unspoken” conventions connecting this awareness to literature prove predictably elusive.

Interest in eighteenth-century illegitimacy is not new. Zunshine cites dozens of scholars, ranging from Lynn Hunt to John Richetti, who have commented on the rising incidence of out-of-wedlock births and its impact. Her own distinctive insight hinges on the contrasting origins of the fictional heroes and heroines. Zunshine suggests that characters whose lineage is dubious or outright illegitimate are almost always male; females, on the other hand, tend to remain “foundlings” throughout the story, although in the end they are often discovered to have perfectly respectable parentage. This climactic revelation, or *anagnorisis*, found its way from ancient literature into early modern fiction. It took most of the eighteenth century for British writers to get rid of a plot-line inherited from classical drama.

Zunshine surveys the works of numerous playwrights and novelists in a succession of chapters, each devoted to a particular theme illustrative of the “reimag-

ining of bastardy” (p. 5). By far the strongest chapter of the book is the closing one, in which Zunshine discusses Harriet Smith, the illegitimate character in Jane Austen’s *Emma* (1814), and argues that, in contrast to her predecessors, Austen left Harriet an unredeemed bastard, implying that a female in that position might achieve self-sufficiency by contracting a marriage worthy of her station. Along the way, Zunshine mentions only two other authors who had challenged this literary stereotype: Daniel Defoe and Henry Fielding, whose protagonists Moll Flanders and Tom Jones were presented as bastards unapologetically and (almost) unequivocally. This frank portrayal correlated with what Zunshine calls the “incipient cultural realization” that illegitimacy did not pose a threat to the majority of middle-class families, and it signaled an end to “the obligatory transformation of bastards into foundlings” that had characterized earlier fiction (p. 167). Zunshine succeeds in demonstrating an interesting and significant shift in the handling of illegitimate characters, especially women.

In other respects, however, the argument is less effective. The “foundling narrative,” Zunshine asserts, was used to deal indirectly with vexed issues of the time—namely infanticide and disputed inheritance. For instance, Richard Steele’s play, *The Conscious Lovers* (1722), “gave voice to the ‘unspeakable’ issue of infanticide and to the thousands of everyday familial crises over the transmission of property, while simultaneously burying these jarring voices under the stylized surface of his ‘innocent’ foundling comedy” (pp. 38-39). This seems plausible, yet doubts arise because there is so little independent evidence of the “cultural anxiety” that Zunshine claims to detect (p. 34). One simply wonders how many in the middle class were troubled, consciously or unconsciously, by the thought of illegitimate heirs being denied their inheritance or, worse, gaining it. Moreover, when it came to real-life bastards, the vast majority were born to and remained in the lower orders. This

was a fact that *did* motivate contemporaries, and it deserves more attention. If unwanted children grew up to be disorderly adults, they might pose a very real danger to property through crime, vagrancy, and idleness. As Zunshine herself notes, the condition of abandoned children inspired numerous charities with the professed aim of getting young beggars off the streets as well as lessening infanticide. Middle-class people not only mentioned these evils, they attacked them. The symbolic association between actual social institutions and the fictional representation of bastardy is not always capable of supporting Zunshine's wide-ranging speculation. So, on the one hand, it makes sense to see Moll Flanders as a "poster child" for the anti-infanticide campaign that underlay the establishment of the London Foundling Hospital (p. 41). But when Zunshine deploys the Foundling Hospital as the backdrop to her discussion of Samuel Richardson's *History of Sir Charles Grandison* (1753), she turns first to the conspicuous absence of female donors. After spending several pages discounting the plausible explanations that historians have advanced for this apparent indifference—for example, women's withdrawal into domesticity or concern about indirectly encouraging immorality—she returns abruptly to the novel, suggesting that Charlotte Grandison's insensitivity toward infanticide among the poor is motivated by concern over her own "vulnerability to illegitimate pretenders to family fortunes" (p. 123). The conclusion Zunshine draws here is no stronger than the ones she passes over and, from an historian's perspective, is the least satisfying of the lot, because it relies the most on a narrowly focused reading of a work of literature.

To be sure, the bibliography is replete with relevant, though not always recent, historical authorities, many of which are employed to good effect. But Zunshine

sometimes ignores their conclusions, almost perversely. For example, Susan Staves and John Habbakuk are invoked to show that English landed families had developed strict settlement and that this measure effectively barred interlopers from inheriting property. How then could Richardson, who knew these rules, have portrayed the aristocratic Grandisons as under threat from an illegitimate intruder? Zunshine concludes, "what is really going on here is that Richardson projects the familiar economic fear of the middle-class family threatened by illegitimacy on the upper-class family" (pp. 122-123). This seems like a stretch. Zunshine's diagnosis extends not just to the authors' inner motives but to the mental state of the audience as well. Fanny Burney permits her heroine Evelina to escape suspicion of illegitimacy, while the lower-class Polly Green becomes a "bantling" or abandoned bastard; thus, we are told, the novel "functions as a compensatory fantasy for a culture groping for ... a moral justification for a deeply troubled status quo according to which the unhallowed sexuality of parents (excluding aristocrats) led to the socioeconomic exclusion of children" (p. 147).

Previous students, Zunshine says, have been too inclined to embrace a "progressive" view of the Enlightenment's treatment of bastardy, whereas she insists that the plight of these characters was "read with an uneasy mixture of opprobrium and compassion" by contemporaries (p. 20). Whether or not readers are comfortable with the author's interdisciplinary approach—this reviewer, for one, welcomes it—they will wish she had quoted more contemporary critical and personal reaction to the works under discussion. Admittedly, such source material is hard to come by, but its absence seriously weakens an intriguing argument.

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