

In Female Disguise: An Anthology of English and American Short Stories and Literary Passages. Edited by PETER FARRER. Pp. lviii+300. Garston, Liverpool: Karn Publications, 1992. £15.

The greater part of this anthology consists of more or less successfully excerpted passages from both well-known and obscure novels from 1475 to approximately 1900. Many are excellent reading, but some of them do not succeed so well, either because they are not capable of standing out of context, or because they seem almost irrelevant to the idea of the collection. In these, the motif of a male in female disguise is of only marginal importance to the passage as a whole. For example, the excerpt from Richardson's *Pamela*—in which the determined Mr B, with the complicity of two women servants, disguises himself as his chambermaid in order to seduce Pamela by becoming her expected bedfellow—focuses entirely on Pamela's state of mind, her terrible distress at being victimized by Mr B and his servants. Likewise, the passage from Mrs Gaskell's *Cranford* concentrates wholly on the suffering of a family after the father flogs his prankster son for parading outside in his sister's clothes cuddling a pillow-'baby'. The boy leaves home immediately to join the navy, never to return until many years later. The passage primarily describes in moving detail the agony of the heart-broken father and mother searching in vain for their son, the death of the mother, and the self-sacrificing care of a sister for her grieving father. This lack of focus on the disguise is apparent in many other excerpts, and several of the selections have nothing whatever to do with men in female disguise at all; they illustrate instead that some men have effeminate looks or characteristics while others are fascinated by women's clothing. A petticoat fetishist is hardly a man in female disguise.

In addition to the excerpts, the anthology contains about a dozen short stories, some by well-known authors, others anonymous pieces from a Victorian periodical called *Modern Society*; most are mildly humorous. They involve gentlemen infatuated with 'ladies' who are disguised males, or the transvestite practical jokes of assorted schoolboys, undergraduates, young soldiers, thieves, con artists, etc.

The long introductory essay by the editor is a perfect model of what thesis mentors tell their students a research paper ought *not* to be: it is a once-over-lightly, commentaryless summary of the pieces included in the book, a patchwork quilt of many, often unconscionably long, contextless quotations from works not included in the book, and assorted extraneous material. It contains a paragraph classifying the motive for disguise as either necessary or frivolous and another categorizing the consequences of the disguised, but no serious analysis of what sexual disguise and its impact on the deceived *mean* in psychological or cultural terms.

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Theorizing American Literature: Hegel, the Sign, and History. Edited by BAINARD COWAN and JOSEPH KRONICK. Pp. x+294. Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1991. £22.50.

The assumption behind *Theorizing American Literature* would appear to be that before it can be used, literature needs to undergo some special treatment as a steak is tenderized or cloth pre-shrunk. The contributors believe that to understand literary texts it is necessary to read them in terms of some philosopher or abstract thinker (in this case Derrida and Hegel). This is to misconceive the nature of literary theory. To be valid a literary theory like any scientific theory must be derived from, and conform to, the data rather than be superimposed upon it. The best theories are clear and simple. Obscurity is a sign that an idea has not been thought through carefully enough.

Ostensibly this book is about Hegel's place in the history of American thought, but although some essays contain information on this subject, the authors are more concerned to try to apply what they believe to be Hegel's ideas, or ideas that suggest Hegel's ideas, to American literature. When one of the editors praises a contributor's 'remarkably convincing establishment' that 'Hegelian thought was already present in Puritan America before it was present in Hegel's own person' (p. 1), it is evident that this is in large measure a work of fantasy. Moreover, it is filled with difficult, obscure and, at their face value, nonsensical statements, such as: 'But this growing

sublimity tended not to regulate the axiological and analogical relation between finite and universal consciousness, or between the natural and transcendental, with Emersonian transparency' (p. 63). Even those desperately interested in Hegel's influence in the United States may find this book unreadable, but in this it is typical of much recent criticism.

What is the reason for this difficulty? Why are so many intelligent people choosing to write so badly? This highly mannered style has obviously been worked at, the obfuscation is deliberate. Criticism such as this is characterized by the fact that it is impossible very often to say what it means or what it is about. Theory is always *about* something. If the subject is not stated, or uncertain, as is the case in most of these essays, then it is an unconscious one, some phantasy of the critic. The uncertainty or indeterminacy is willed. This criticism is not interested in authors or texts but is self-interested, a form of autobiography. Writing of this type is not communication but acting out. The critic is trying to recover some primary amorphous state. Language is being used not to describe, but to imitate this amorphousness. This is why so many of the sentences have no ascertainable meaning.

Kathryne Lindberg's 'Whitman's "Convertible Terms"' considers the relation of the poet to Hegel. Many of her comments are so intelligent and perspicacious that it is to be regretted that so much of the argument is tangled in jargon and at the end is side-tracked in incompletely formulated notions of self and ideology. The idea of 'convertible terms' is a very good one, as is her observation that 'certain anxieties about dialectics and contradiction, were barely repressed in Whitman's work' (p. 243). This attempt to look more deeply into Whitman's contradictions and his *idea* of contradiction is the most valuable part of the essay.

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