

Martha C. Nussbaum and Alison L. LaCroix, eds., *Subversion and Sympathy: Gender, Law, and the British Novel*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. 336. £53. ISBN 9780199812042.

Martha Nussbaum and Alison LaCroix's edited book *Subversion and Sympathy: Gender, Law, and the British Novel* (2013) is viewed with mixed feelings. The interdisciplinary venture is in itself very commendable as it tries to connect history, gender studies, philosophy, literary studies, and law. It aims at reinvigorating the methodology of the law and literature movement – which started in the 1970s – by provoking a cross-disciplinary conversation. When embarking on this project the editors hoped that the examination of human character nearly two centuries ago could instruct us today and enrich our understanding of deeper human issues. The scope of the enterprise may have been too large and ambitious for the outcome to be fully satisfactory.

In her preface, Diane Wood states that the book wishes to focus on the position of women in the British novels of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which the title does not announce very clearly. If the concept of subversion is indeed dealt with at length, little is said about 'sympathy', which may be one potential methodological weakness. Whereas the Preface only consists of a basic reminder of the status of women at the time and the existence of a set of constraints which they complied with or rebelled against, the Introduction does a brilliant job of raising crucial theoretical issues about the blindness of the law monopolised by a mostly male social elite. Literature is expected to serve as an eye-opener for the law since the British novel is closely associated with movements of social recognition. From its inception the genre offered something radically new in the history of letters by painstakingly chronicling the lives of ordinary people. It thus serves as a mirror that reflects both the qualities and flaws of society. This is why Ian Watt associates the rise of the novel with the rise of democracy. The book as a whole promises a lot through its excellent Introduction connecting law and literature, and yet achieves much less, as the editors themselves seem to be aware of: 'taken as a group, the papers do not have a "bottom line" either about normative social issues or about the relationship between literature and law' (21). That said, the essays in this volume still deserve our full appreciation for energizing the debate, qualifying and complicating the reader's thinking.

The volume consists of fourteen essays written by eminent British and American scholars in both fields, literature and law. It is divided into four main sections 'Marriage and Sex', 'Law, Social Norms, and Women's Agency', 'Property, Commerce and Travel' before concluding with a more metatextual reflection on the role of readers. The themes are varied and the structure is coherent. Yet, despite a few very welcome studies of Defoe, Scott, and Austen, half of the corpus deals with Trollope (4 essays altogether) and Hardy (3 essays altogether). Considering the ambitious programme, a broader range of authors would have helped avoid repetitions and enlarge our reflections. Texts by Dickens, Thackeray or Eliot are surprisingly absent.

The first two sections of the volume are particularly illuminating, with Julie Suk examining the legal consequences of wife sale, and Geoffrey R. Stone looking at the way the law regulates artistic expression and, in particular, sexual explicitness. Adopting a more pessimistic approach, Amanda Claybaugh convincingly demonstrates that the law is irrelevant to the deeper sufferings of human beings: even though unhappy couples could divorce in Victorian times, they did not tend to do so. According to Richard A. Posner, novels do not supply a direct template for legal reform. This is seen through the examples of Jane Austen and Thomas Hardy, who report legal cases with no reformist spirit. This section successfully concludes that novels are valuable to the law, and to lawyers, mainly because of the general insights into society and human beings they afford.

The second section of the book deals with the extent of women's agency and freedom against the background of constraining social norms. It investigates the space for choice despite a large-scale absence of choice, through the example of women defying conventional male norms in Walter Scott's *The Heart of Midlothian*, or via the image of 'bastards' and the ways that stereotypes are challenged.

The next two sections are more problematic, mainly because they depart from the road map announced in the Introduction; a departure which, once again, the editors seem to be well aware of ('not overtly linked to gender', 207). This takes us away from the core of the debate and returns us instead to the initial question of marriage, resulting in a feeling of argumentative stasis.

This book is well worth a read: it is well presented and nicely written. Even if the substantive contribution is questionable, the methodological addition is tangible. It deserves credit for bringing literature and law together. It paves the way for more debates about how the two disciplines can engage with and learn from each other.

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