

**Eva König, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Fiction: The Vicissitudes of the Eighteenth-Century Subject*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014. Pp. 277. £58. ISBN 9781137382016.**

The possibilities of the literary orphan in the nineteenth-century has attracted interest due to both the Romantic conceptualisation of childhood and the importance of the concept of the family as social and imperial structure. Eva König's new book, *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, considers the orphan figure at an earlier moment, the formative moment of the novel as a genre. In doing so, König explores how this genre gave voice to the emerging middle-classes while articulating a notion of female selfhood in an overtly patriarchal society.

In truth, part of König's project offers a familiar understanding of the novel as a potentially radical form, speaking to the developing middle-classes while offering opportunities for women writers. This has been central to eighteenth-century and genre studies for the past few decades. However, König offers a wide-ranging and extensive examination of sixteen eighteenth-century novels by Defoe, Richardson, Haywood, Inchbald, Burney, Lennox, Austen, Hays, Smith, Walpole, Reeve, and Radcliffe. The book is all the more impressive for the detailed, considered analysis of texts which ensures that this certainly is not a survey but an original contribution to the understanding of the texts through the overarching conceptual vehicle of the orphan. The construction of Burney's *Evelina* as a site of battle between patriarchy and matriarchy is particularly useful; the battle for the orphan Evelina by the opposing grandparents at the moment of her entrance into society is, as König identifies, an attempt to usurp patriarchal power. König deliberately chooses novels that narrate stories of orphans nearing adulthood; this is a key 'liminal phase', the process through which full selfhood is announced. It coincides with the moment whereby social responsibilities and social practices restrict the agency of the self.

From the onset, König is clear that her conceptualisation of the orphan is not as 'an empirical reality' but rather as an 'empty signifier' through which debates regarding the role and status of women, selfhood and the development of the novel as genre could be played out. The novel, with its emphasis on the sustained development of character, provides a useful vehicle through which notions of selfhood and identity could be both negotiated and critiqued. König's particular interest in gender reflects the choice to examine predominantly women authors writing about female orphans. As such, it is an extremely useful contribution to gender studies particularly understanding how gender was negotiated through authorship, readership and aesthetic form.

With a particular focus on female orphans, König explores how the authors probe patriarchy and the restrictions placed on women. For female readers these narratives operate as 'conduct manuals' on how to be interpellated into patriarchy. Ironically, for male readers these narratives allow them to experience vicariously the exercise of male power and the process of becoming a subject.

The wide-ranging role of the family as seat of patriarch, property, and social identity offers a daunting obstacle which female orphans coming of age need to negotiate. Entrance into the family through marriage would mean the loss of any financial independence a female orphan might have. These middle-class orphans, who have some property providing them with unusual freedom and autonomy, provide the greatest interest to König as she explores how they are gradually brought under control by a patriarchal system. As such, the family could be seen as operating as a mechanism of female castration.

König marries the wider issues regarding gender, identity and social place with a Lacanian framework which categorizes various literary orphans as representative of stages of development from the 'boundless pre-imaginary', through the mirror stage (imaginary) and ultimately ending up in the symbolic. It is a movement into language, narrated through

language, which constitutes the development of selfhood. The structuring of the book into five sections ('Bastards and Foundlings in Pre-Imaginary Oscillation Mirror', 'Mirror on the Wall: The Deluded Heiress and the Imaginary', 'Dispossessed Children: The Subject of the Symbolic', 'The Return of the Repressed: Radcliffe's Matriarchy', 'The Orphan in Mourning') clearly charts the movement of the book through these Lacanian development stages, offering an important narrative intersecting narratives of class and social structure in the eighteenth century.

However, by emptying the signification of the literary orphan, ignoring the material in privileging the psychoanalytic, König misses the opportunity to explore the development of the middle-class family system within the demise of the feudal (another family system of sorts), robbing the orphan of its specificity which in itself negates selfhood. One cannot help but feel that engagement with work such as Cheryl L. Nixon's *The Orphan in Eighteenth-Century Law and Literature: Estate, Body and Blood* would have further developed König's work. This is not the only omission of work published on orphans: it is not a crowded field, König would have done well to situate her valuable work within it.

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