
Hans-Peter Wagner. *An Introduction to British and Irish Fiction: Renaissance to Romanticism.* Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2014, 262 pp., 60 illustr., € 29.50.

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Hans-Peter Wagner's *Introduction to British and Irish Fiction: Renaissance to Romanticism* offers an unusual approach to the field of eighteenth-century prose fiction: proceeding from the by now well-established new historicist practice of embedding literature in the discursive contexts of its time, it explores in addition the specific relationships and interdependences between the verbal-textual discourse of the novel and the visual discourse of art. In so doing, it combines historical contextualisation with close readings of representative text passages and the semiotics of images, title pages and frontispieces. Based on the salutary insight "that pictures are as rhetorical, biased, and non-realistic as the texts they 'illustrate'" (3), this introduction attends to the ways in which verbal and visual representations respond to their cultural environments as well as to each other. Two preliminary chapters that give a survey of the political, social and philosophical development during "The Eighteenth Century in Britain and Ireland" and of the manifold precursors and varieties of "Prose Fiction and Related Genres before 1700" (including, for instance, the moral allegory, picaresque

fiction, travel writing, and journalism; though just how “Visual Narratives and Public Shows” contributed to the development of prose fiction specifically rather than, say, drama remains unclear) are followed by fourteen well-structured, accessible chapters on key novels from the eighteenth century. Works by Daniel Defoe, Samuel Richardson and Henry Fielding receive two chapters each, an emphasis that certainly is not unmerited while it continues the traditional view of the canon established already by Ian Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel* in 1957, especially when compared to the more innovative inclusion of Cleland’s *Fanny Hill* (ch. 11). Another welcome innovation is a chapter on “The Narrative Art of William Hogarth”, in which the series *A Harlot’s Progress*, *A Rake’s Progress*, *Marriage A-la-Mode*, *Industry and Idleness*, as well as the mini-series *Before and After* are discussed in terms of “Hogarth’s narratological manner” (135), which draws on the literary techniques of emplotment, sequencing, allegory, allusion, and satire. Each chapter begins with some background information on the author’s biography and times, then offers a detailed, instructive close-reading of the novel’s title-page, observations on plot and form, and – comprising the bulk of each chapter – an overview of the relevant critical aspects and readings. The volume closes with an 11-page guide to “Further Reading” that offers brief comments on the most relevant anthologies, literary histories and surveys or general critical studies available. Concise enough to be read as an overview but going into detail where it matters, most of the chapters will serve the student reader as a reliable guide through the bewilderingly prolific field of eighteenth-century prose fiction.

Visual material beyond the title-pages, frontispieces or illustrations published with the early editions overwhelmingly tends to come from Hogarth’s oeuvre – hardly a surprise, given that Hogarth can truly count as one of the most prolific commentators on mid-eighteenth century life, and that the author of this introduction is an expert on Hogarth. This expertise usually results in highly informative as well as entertaining interpretations of the literary text in the light of a well-chosen image, and vice versa. Sometimes, however, images are only briefly alluded to (e.g. on 189/190, fig. 72), or some information seems to have been added for the mere sake of including yet another image (148, fig. 51/52), or an almost identical visual representation is offered for two novels without further comment on the differences: if there are none, then why include both pictures? A striking instance are two depictions of *Lucretia* by Lucas Cranach the Elder, 1530 and 1532, which are used in the chapters on *Pamela* (107, fig. 38) and *Clarissa* (121, fig. 44). The painting by Artemisia Gentileschi of the same *sujet* is briefly mentioned but not drawn on although, being one hundred years older than those by Cranach, it would seem closer to the contemporary eighteenth-century reader’s ideas of chastity and femininity, to say nothing of Rembrandt’s 1666 painting. In

those cases, the book fails to live up to its own claim not to merely “illustrate” (the scare quotes indicating that this is something despicable) but “to show how visual representations reacted alongside the writers of fiction, and how the later responded to pictures of all kinds” (2). Such instances are all the more conspicuous since Wagner from the start demonstrates the value of – and his own considerable skill at – reading text and image together, leaving the readers disappointed when faced with a merely illustrative use of pictures.

While on the whole doing a good job as an *Introduction to British and Irish Fiction*, the volume disappoints in some regards, some less serious than others. The subtitle “Renaissance to Romanticism” is misleading: the period actually under discussion is that in between, which has become known as the long eighteenth century, beginning with the Restoration and ending (depending on whether political or cultural events are considered as hallmarks) either with the French Revolution in 1789 or the publication of Wordsworth’s *Lyrical Ballads* in 1798. Moreover, Wagner’s introduction does not treat the full scale of literary prose which was produced during that time either: under his hands, the long eighteenth century is effectively reduced to some seventy years, as the novels considered in individual chapters range from Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, published in 1719, to Beckford’s *Vathek*, dating from 1786. While Wagner offers a survey chapter on “Prose fiction and related genres before 1700” which considers various modes of writing and publication, a narrow understanding of eighteenth-century fiction leads to the exclusion of a number of authors and works, making the canon look more traditional than it need be. The most conspicuous absence – which Wagner acknowledges uncomfortably in his introductory comments (1, 3–4) – is that of the many women authors who profoundly shaped the English literary culture of the period. Wagner is content with “nam[ing] just the most important” writers (Aphra Behn, Mrs Manley, Eliza Haywood, and Charlotte Lennox) and then justifying his failure to take their important contributions into account on the grounds that “I believe in historical importance (in terms of form and genre)” (3) – a criterion which apparently does not apply to the literary products of women writers. It is only by way of exception to the rule of the historical unimportance of female writing that Wagner deigns to “deal with some female authors” in a sub-chapter on “Romance” (where, again, Behn, Manley, Haywood and Lennox receive mention, but no critical treatment; neither are their works outside the realm of romance acknowledged) and a chapter on Frances Burney’s *Evelina*, a novel which was an enormous success on publication and a major representative of the conduct novel, but which Wagner does not seem to have much to say about: the chapter, even though it includes two half-page images, is the shortest in the volume. Where is an adequate discussion of Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko*, such an important transition point from heroic romance to

realism?¹ Where is Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, whose *Turkish Embassy Letters* are not even mentioned in the subchapter on travel literature? Where is Sarah Fielding, who not only contributed to her brother's *Joseph Andrews* (1742), that satirical spin-off from Richardson's *Pamela*, but wrote with *The Adventures of David Simple* (1744) one of the first sentimental novels, whose success is evidenced by several editions, translations into French and German, as well as three sequels? Where is Sarah Scott, whose *Millenium Hall* draws such a vivid picture of the intellectual culture of the Bluestockings? Where is Elizabeth Inchbald, best known as a prolific playwright, whose *Simple Story* (1791) revamped the mode of romance while contributing a trenchant critique of the female (mis)education to sensibility, paving the way for Jane Austen's satirical conduct novels? Why is Ann Radcliffe not considered in the chapter on Gothic fiction? Surely the exclusion of these authors cannot be justified by a lack of "historical importance" either with regard to form or genre, as for the last thirty years critical studies have conclusively established the centrality of female writers' contributions to the period's formal experiments in prose fiction (as well as non-fictional modes of writing). A look into Ina Schabert's *Englische Literaturgeschichte aus Sicht der Geschlechterforschung* (vol 1., 1997) would have acquainted the author with the state of the art some twenty years ago; but although Wagner himself laments that "[i]n the United States and in Britain, academic criticism not written in English is, alas, virtually ignored" (231), he fails to include this by now standard work of literary history on his list of titles recommended for further reading.

Students and faculty who wish to work with a balanced, informative introduction to the period that manages to treat prose writing as well as drama and poetry of the long eighteenth-century in a way that is informed by the insights of new historicism, cultural materialism, feminist and post-colonial studies, and that therefore also includes – as a matter of fact, not as a noteworthy exception – texts authored by women and people of colour, are referred to Charlotte Sussman's equally brilliant and comprehensive *Eighteenth-Century English Literature* (2012).

1 It can be found in Laura Brown's important essay "The Romance of Empire: Oroonoko and the Trade in Slaves", reprinted in *Oroonoko: An Authoritative Text, Historical Backgrounds, Criticism* (1997: 232–245), a critical edition which includes several other essays that establish beyond doubt the importance of this text for the development of prose fiction.

Works Cited

Brown, Laura. 1997. "The Romance of Empire: Oroonoko and the Trade in Slaves". In: Aphra Behn. *Oroonoko: An Authoritative Text, Historical Backgrounds, Criticism*. Ed. Joanna Lipking. Norton Critical Editions. New York: Norton. 232–245.