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and he gestures in the direction of wanting to fulfill them. He is good enough that he has always challenged comparison with his betters and he has lost in that company.

So he did not do enough. But then, a man who wrote three sparkling and still staged comic works, including one of the best British plays between the 1690s and the 1890s; who next, in a cast presenting Burke, Fox and Pitt, was a starring player on the intense political stage of the 1790s; and who was admired as an author and admired for his personal quality by Dr. Johnson in one century and by Lord Byron in another, has done something in his life.

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Equivocal Beings: Politics, Gender, and Sentimentality in the 1790s—Wollstonecraft, Radcliffe, Burney, Austen. *Claudia L. Johnson*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995. Pp. ix+239.

In *Equivocal Beings*, Claudia L. Johnson gives a new twist to the revisionist interpretation of sentimentalism. Whereas older literary critics like J. M. S. Tompkins tended to associate sentimentalism and sentimentality with the “feminization of culture,” more recent cultural and literary historians, like G. J. Barker-Benfield (in *The Culture of Sensibility* [Chicago, 1992]), have begun to argue that sentimentalism was actually a development within cultural ideas about masculinity. Johnson builds on this revisionist argument by suggesting that “sentimentality entailed . . . the ‘masculinization’ of formerly feminine gender traits, and that the affective practices associated with it [were] valued *not* because they [were] understood as feminine, but precisely and only insofar as they [were] recoded as masculine” (p. 14). Rather than focusing on the consequences of sentimentality for men, as Barker-Benfield generally does, however, Johnson pursues this insight into the domain of women’s writing. By examining four women writers of the 1790s—Mary Wollstonecraft, Ann Radcliffe, Frances Burney, and Jane Austen—Johnson demonstrates that the price women paid for the rise of sentimentalism was more than just a few decorous tears. In her account, the Gothic excesses of the 1790s constitute the sadism always implicit in sentimentalism, and these women’s efforts to dramatize feminine subjectivity in the context of such misogyny were fated to fail.

Johnson’s discussion of the ideological complexities of sentimentalism—that she variously calls the “logic” (p. 100), the “discourse”

(p. 114), and the “economy” (p. 115) of male sentimentality—is provocative and nuanced. As female suffering was appropriated by radicals and conservatives alike to ground normative masculinity, Johnson explains, women were deprived of both a “distinct gender site” (p. 11) and narrative terms for describing their own subjectivity. The consequences of this appropriation were twofold: on the one hand, all women risked becoming “equivocal beings” who were either too masculine or too feminine; and, on the other hand, women writers were reduced to repeating the contradictions of the ideology in which they were ensnared. The works of the four writers examined here thus “disclose as well as protest the peculiar contradictions of sentimentality . . . which urgently (if variously) insists on heterosexuality as a political duty, yet at the same time unsettles customary definitions of gender and sexuality both *between* and *within* the sexes, problematizing both femininity as well as other versions of masculinity. Under such circumstances, not female propriety alone but female being itself is almost impossible to negotiate” (p. 17).

If sentimentality drove a wedge between sex and gender so as to leave no place for female heterosexuality, it did open one new arena in which women could explore affectivity: homosociality. In Johnson’s analyses of these women’s writings, homosociality emerges as a utopian alternative to the heterosexuality that sentimentality placed under erasure. Thus, in Wollstonecraft’s *Maria*, Johnson invites us to “conclude that the emancipated, sturdy, purposive, mutually respected, and rationally loving couple Wollstonecraft spent her career imagining is, finally, a female couple” (p. 69). Radcliffe and Burney also valorized proto- or quasi-lesbian relationships, according to Johnson. In the wake of the Terror “Radcliffe’s fiction . . . increasingly turns to the alternative of homoerotic relations, and to the sorts of attachments which . . . provide heroines the respite of free space, where their own affectivity can for once be indulged and enjoyed” (p. 136); and in Burney’s *The Wanderer* “it is impossible to read . . . any descriptions of Lady Aurora’s and Ellis/Juliet’s relationship without confronting the ecstatically homoerotic space opened out by warps in sentimental ideology itself” (p. 178). As for Jane Austen, well, we all know by now that her girls masturbate, but Johnson demonstrates as effectively as anyone I know that *Emma* aspired to correct the crisis in masculinity that served as backdrop to those masturbating girls.

Johnson is an accomplished reader of texts although, for reasons to which I will return in a moment, the organization of each chapter is so similar that her argument risks becoming predictable. Johnson can also be an accomplished stylist (“Frances Burney’s heroines have a passion for abjection. Their careers evince it with an extravagance at once

grotesque and festive" [p. 141]). As a consequence, *Equivocal Beings* is, on the whole, an unusually pleasurable book to read. Despite the pleasure this book yields, however, and despite Johnson's important observations about gender and homoeroticism in the 1790s, I was finally disappointed that Johnson did not push beyond the theoretical paradigm that underwrites *Equivocal Beings*. As the repetitious arrangement of each chapter suggests, theoretically, *Equivocal Beings* traverses very familiar territory: literature performs ideological work, so this assumption goes, but in the process literary works inevitably generate contradictions, either because the ideology is inherently contradictory or because the author is of two minds about it; thus the task of the literary critic is to trace the text's imbrication with ideology, its intricate texture of complicity and subversion. While this theoretical paradigm provides a good rationale for close textual analysis, and while it has certainly prompted important literary-critical work in the last decade, it no longer seems an altogether satisfying way of either accounting for literary works or describing their textual dynamics. There are moments in *Equivocal Beings* at which Johnson hints at an alternative theoretical model, one that could position individual texts (literary or otherwise) in a history of the construction and division of knowledge more generally. While this is admittedly my hobbyhorse and not hers, I want to conclude with a brief description of how Johnson might have told this other story, which occasionally surfaces in the book she has written.

During the course of the eighteenth century—the very period in which sentimentalism emerged in Britain—apologists for a nonconfrontational form of sociality called "politeness" began to develop a "disinterested" form of knowledge-production, which we now associate with both "literature" and "aesthetics." Indeed, in ways too complex for me to explore here, sentimentalism was inextricably linked to the emergent discourse of aesthetics; and in the 1760s, texts like Laurence Sterne's *A Sentimental Journey* promoted the novel as the genre best suited to produce the kind of nonpolitical, nontheological knowledge associated with aesthetics. It was not until the Romantic period, however, when the discourse of aesthetic appreciation had been generalized and inextricably linked to literature, that even those texts that late twentieth-century critics read as nonpolitical came to seem nonpolitical. Thus, when Johnson seeks to recover the political content of these novels, she is restoring to them a content that they did have for readers in the 1790s.

This is perfectly consistent with what Johnson says in the introduction to *Equivocal Beings*. I think she could have made a theoretically more far-reaching claim for the readings she offers, however, if she had gone on to note that the reason that late twentieth-century readers

have tended to overlook the political dimension of these novels is that the novels of the 1790s also constituted a site where a new kind of knowledge was just beginning to be produced. This mode of knowledge is what we call psychology, and its (albeit rudimentary) prominence in these novels accounts for their apparent affinity with psychoanalytic (nonpolitical, ahistorical) interpretations. Viewed as an episode in the history of epistemology, however, instead of as a chapter in political history, women's writing, or psychology, the novels can be seen as the site where the continuing tension between aesthetics (especially an aesthetics of the sublime) and politics was completely recast by the emergence of this new kind of knowledge. The results of this intersection were complex, but surely they included the disruption of those gender roles that had stabilized political and theological discourse throughout the eighteenth century, and to which aesthetics had an extremely complex relation.

Thus women's novels written in the 1790s did work through the implications of disrupted gender, as Johnson so eloquently demonstrates. But seeing these novels as producing new knowledge—about psychosexuality—rather than simply as alternately subverting and complying with an ideology that “really” exists elsewhere enables us to place them in the larger history to which they were such important contributors.

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The Reception of Myth in English Romanticism. *Anthony John Harding*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995. Pp. xiv+289.

Over the years, myth criticism has tended to gravitate toward Romantic literature, since the Romantic poets drew heavily on traditional myth in their writing and were also creative mythmakers themselves. It is no accident that probably the outstanding representative of myth criticism in this century, Northrop Frye, inaugurated his career with a book on William Blake. But lately, as Anthony John Harding points out, myth criticism has fallen out of favor with Romanticists. Analysis of literature in terms of mythic patterns seems to point to psychological and other universal principles that are not in favor with a profession dominated by movements such as the new historicism. As long as critics pride themselves on grounding their discussions in concrete economic, social, and political details and reject the notion that authors can transcend their historical moment, the sweeping generalizations about