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Fictional Genders: Role and Representation in Nineteenth-Century French Narrative by  
DOROTHY KELLY

Review by: ROBERT R. BROCK

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Habegger's *Henry James and the "Woman Business"* and McWhirter's *Desire and Love in Henry James* offer new insights into James's fiction and suggest new avenues for further investigation. Both scholars, in very different ways, offer us substantial fare indeed.

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KELLY, DOROTHY. *Fictional Genders: Role and Representation in Nineteenth-Century French Narrative* (Lincoln, Nebraska and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989). x + 216 pp. \$25.00.

The aim of the work, as stated in the preface, is to examine the equivocal nature of gender identity in selected works of the nineteenth-century realists Balzac, Flaubert, and Stendhal. (One novel of the little-known Rachilde is also included.) Kelly gives a thorough and detailed analysis of those characters who possess both masculine and feminine traits, the conflicts caused by such confusion, their ultimate fate and its effect on their immediate entourage.

One caveat, if I may. The manuscript was done on a word-processor that has a justified margins button. Unfortunately, the person who typed it kept forgetting that the machine also has a return button. The result is that there is, almost on every other page, one to three or four words, totally isolated in the middle of the line. It makes the book look

strange.

In the introduction, "The Aporia of Gender," she acknowledges her debt to such figures as Freud, Lacan, and Derrida. The work is not, however, merely a slavish rehashing of their ideas. She is careful to point out their contradictions and inconsistencies while explaining her own point of view. This part of the book is very dense due, as she notes, to the great difficulty of some of the writings of her mentors. It is very much to her credit that she makes them comprehensible and does not stoop to simply repeating them in jargon-ridden clichés.

If the main idea can be summed up in a nut-shell, it would be that male figures possess the phallus, female ones do not. Women, and indeed effeminate males, are thus defined by what they do *not* have: the phallus. (I am not at all convinced that women can only, or even best, be defined by what they "lack," but that is another problem.) The phallus is seen as anything that confers power over others, be it money, machines, or authority. As Kelly is careful to point out, this state of affairs was sanctioned not only by society in general, but specifically by the Napoleonic Code. Everything then was directed to keeping women in their place, to keeping them powerless. But the situation was seldom really stable.

Thus Eugenie Grandet, poor and powerless as long as her father was alive, becomes Grandet as soon as he dies and she inherits his gold and the power that it brings. She even goes so far as to enter into an unconsummated marriage with a relatively impoverished, and therefore emasculated, male who will be *her* slave as her mother was her father's slave. The priests in *The Red and the Black* use the power of the Church to enhance their own diminished maleness by exercising that spiritual, and political, power over the even less powerful women, and to the detriment of those males, such as Julien Sorel, who would challenge them. And so on.

Kelly does a brilliant job of arguing her case, particularly in the first two chapters, "Gender and Institutions" and "Gender and Rhetoric: Balzac's Clichés." There is a

notable and laudable reluctance to state bluntly, "This means that." Instead, she offers her findings as possibilities. Her quotes are chosen with extreme and telling precision and, while not all readers, the Jungians for instance, would agree with all her observations, they remain very well done. Her translations are rather pedestrian, a fact that she notes herself, but they are at least accurate.

And then we come to the last two chapters, "Gender and Representation" and "Realism and Fetishism." For some reason, jargon enters the scene: "In this way, representation in *Madame Bovary* becomes androgynous, gender turns into a paradoxical, aporetic state, where meaning becomes contingency and contingency meaning when male modes of representation turn to female" (p. 137). And with jargon, rigid interpretation becomes the order of the day and her arguments become correspondingly less compelling.

Quoting Guy Rosolato, who believes that "the fetish is often a kind of mirroring veil . . . it reflects and reveals the absent penis of the woman and comes to stand in for it" (p. 175), Kelly draws parallels between the shine on a woman's nose and the painting of a woman in Balzac's "Le Chef d'oeuvre inconnu." The painting was non-representational and one notes that, "Dans un coin de la toile le bout d'un pied nu . . . sortait de ce chaos" (p. 172). Kelly's translation, "In a corner of the canvas, the end of a bare foot . . . emerged from this chaos," is faithful to the dictionary, but fails before the emotion attached to the word *bout*. It is the tip of a foot peeking out of the chaos. It is not something pedestrian. It is "un pied délicieux, un pied vivant." (A delicious foot, a living foot.)

Comparing the two then, that "fetishistic shine (glanz) on the nose, which covers the absent penis (glans)" thus finds its equivalent in "the glance at the woman by the realist artist [who] produces the perfect foot that covers over the real woman. The linguistic chain 'glanz/glance/glans' parallels the realist textual reflection of reality and the fetishistic cover-up of feminine identity."

The problem here is the self-inflicted poverty of the Freudian interpretation. A Jungian, and I am not one, would talk of what a nose may suggest. Odor, perhaps, and go on to explore that and other possibilities. In the same manner, the foot could well represent a standpoint, a statement about the nature of woman having nothing to do with an "absent" penis. And there is the fact that in both cases one is dealing with art. The artist may well see the shine on the nose as a study in *clair-obscur*. The foot may be the only thing about the woman that the artist understands in a way that can be rendered by conventional means. For the main thing, after all, is not that Balzac, Stendhal, and Flaubert set out to create Freudian images, but rather to create works of art where problems of the day were to be incorporated but not to the exclusion or the diminution of the art itself.

When Betty Davis died, recently, they showed clips of her films on the evening T.V. news programs. In one, a stunningly beautiful Betty was hunched over a pool table, cue in hand, contemplating a bunch of balls at the far end of the table. A very forgettable male asked plaintively, "Just what do you want?" Davis gave him a wicked smile and a one-word answer: "You." It was that smile that was the essence, not the phallic cue or the scattered balls.

Had Flaubert seen the movie, the billiard room scene in *Madame Bovary* might have led to a very different book.

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