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(review)

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Cato's Tears and the Making of Anglo-American Emotion.

By JULIE ELLISON.

Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

This book historicizes its own appearance. In what Julie Ellison calls “a book of the 1990s,” a decade characterized by controversies over sentimental “representations of suffering,” the bold project of *Cato's Tears and the Making of Anglo-American*

Emotion “is to investigate the cultural history of public emotion” (1–2). Taking issue with what she sees as a dominantly Americanist criticism that has studied sentiment as a female, and specifically domestic, possession, Ellison instead theorizes sentiment as a widely circulating and historically contingent discourse in canonical and lesser-known Anglo-American literature of the “long” eighteenth century. Such a critical position produces an intense discursive exploration of the changing literary trope of the sentimental man.

Notwithstanding her familiarity with contemporary views of sentiment, Ellison returns to English Restoration politics in order to theorize this literary and political figure. Simply put, she traces the role of sentiment in shaping the discourses of opposition and change whereby men experience a Shaftesburian “aestheticized homosocial Whiggishness.” Ellison claims that literary renditions of familial relations between fathers and sons are important registers of political ideology: “Masculine relations within the family . . . become fundamental to the nonfamilial bonds of men who are connected to one another through political parties, factions, conspiracies, and friendships. . . . Strategies of masculine affections and postmonarchical institutions evolved together” (25, 29). The politics of English sentiment, moreover, reveals what Ellison calls the “dilemmas of Whig masculinity” (9). If this phrase recalls the work of Kenneth Silverman and Jay Fliegelman, Ellison originally argues that the tension between “stoicism” and “sentiment” in Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) structures both literary plot and political message. But not without “ambivalence.” In both historical drama and poetry containing “the sacrificial figure of the sensitive young man” (29)—such as Nathaniel Lee’s *Lucius Junius Brutus* (1680), Dryden’s *Absalom and Achitophel* (1681), Joseph Addison’s *Cato* (1713), Trenchard and Gordon’s *Cato’s Letters* among many others—the motif of stoic fathers and weepy sons show the ambiguous effects of the law’s impersonality on the family (36, 58). Cato’s suicide, in other words, shows “the link between failure, manhood, and sentiment” (53).

One of the impressive conceptual foundations of Ellison’s book is its largely successful execution of a “circum-Atlantic” critical perspective. An instance of Ellison’s success with this method occurs in the discussion of the gender politics of fancy. In this case she situates the work of Anna Barbauld, Phillis Wheatley, and Hannah More as part of a discourse “committed to ambitious itineraries through international space” (100), one that “fuses imperial and lyric consciousness.” (Readers, however, might doubt Ellison’s claim that Wheatley “will only articulate resistance or negativity from a perspective of inclusion” [118] in light of her famous letter to Samson Occom). Sometimes the transatlantic perspective atrophies—when Ellison, for example, claims that both American and British prospect poems were “mobile, miscellaneous, and highly disjunctive or episodic” (147). In most cases, however, she ably demystifies nationalist ideologies that may still cloud critical perceptions. Both *Edgar Huntly* (1799) and *The Algerine Captive* (1797), as she argues, embody “a more broadly shared transatlantic idiom” in which aimless men (that one finds in Byron and Wordsworth) wander a “geography of masculine sensibility” in “disorientation and hypermobility” (149).

The kind of racial interactions and reversals that take place in these novels consume much of Ellison’s energies throughout this book, which thematically connects racial and sentimental discourses within the larger context of Anglo-American im-

perial politics. "The literary history of eighteenth-century masculine pathos was demonstrably inseparable from the racial imagination of a colonial and imperial culture" (97). The Cato "master plot" (97) captures the transitional moment from republic to empire, where others become "Roman" through conversions to feeling. If this allows Ellison (after Homi Bhabha and other postcolonial theorists) to avoid the binary between colonizer and colonized, it also shows how sentiment contains "racial" difference. Such an ideological dynamic between race and sentiment Ellison exports to the Roman play's British adaptation to North (and Native) American materials, to elegies, and to American frontier romances like Sarah Wentworth Morton's *Ouabi* (1790), Ann Eliza Bleecker's *The History of Maria Kittle* (1793). There is nothing reductive in Ellison's readings of early American frontier discourse: *Ouabi*, for example, demonstrates "how closely related sentimental seduction plots and narratives of race relations could be, and how, together, these elements provided a way for female authors to explore the psychology of power" (137). But Ellison never comes round to articulating the difference between vanishing Africans—Addison's Juba subsumed sentimentally into the metaphoric British empire—and the "Vanishing American" of frontier romance. A more significant conceptual problem in these otherwise insightful discussions concerns the very meaning of "race." In Ellison's account it is consistently infused with the subjects of gender and empire. Fair enough, but it never engages recent scholarship arguing for the instability of "race" in an era intently theorizing the nature of humanity and human origins.

The major weakness of *Cato's Tears* is also ironically one of its most intriguing arguments: that one can find "early modern forms of [modern] liberal guilt" (7). Time and again, Ellison suggests that the origins of liberal guilt lay in the ideological inequities built into eighteenth-century sentimental culture, which produce instances of the "rhetoric of vicarious relations" (115). My complaint with such an argument is that it sometimes tends to read presentist meanings onto eighteenth-century understandings of "liberty." The "possible ideology of libertarianism" (189) she reads in *Cato's Letters*—and specifically its view of commerce—could be refined by considering important revisionist scholarship by those like James Kloppenberg or Terry Mulcaire who question the capacity of "liberalism" to describe eighteenth-century views of trade. Moreover, what Ellison calls today's "centrist framework" of "neoliberalism" is not such a recent phenomenon responding to the Republican critique of the sentimental fallacy. Indeed, this kind of liberalism invented itself in the 1940s and 1950s, as figures like Lionel Trilling and Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., defined the American "Left" against communism and other forms of what they saw as cultural totalitarianism. In other words, what Ellison insightfully sees as the "toughness" (193) of conservative groups like the Cato Institute may be understood in a postwar liberal tradition.

Still, *Cato's Tears* is an engaging, conceptually original study that allows us to see the late eighteenth century as "sensibility's second act" (18) and "republicanism" not as a singular ideology but as a literary and political "plot." Both its methods and insights make it an influential work in eighteenth-century transatlantic studies.