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Women and Romance

Laurie Langbauer

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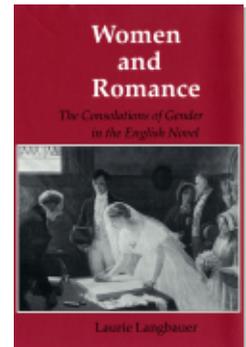
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Foreword

As the editors of *Reading Women Writing*, we are committed to furthering international feminist debate. To that end, we seek books that rigorously explore how differences of class, race, ethnic background, nationality, religious preference, and sexual choice inform women's writing. Books sensitive to the ways women's writings are classified, evaluated, read, and taught are central to the series. Of particular interest to us are feminist criticism of non-canonical texts (including film, popular culture, and new and as yet unnamed genres); confrontations of first-world theory with beyond-the-first-world texts; and books on colonial and postcolonial writing that generate their own theoretical positions. Dedicated primarily although not exclusively to the examination of literature by women, *Reading Women Writing* highlights differing, even contradictory, theoretical positions on texts read in cultural context.

Laurie Langbauer's *Women and Romance: The Consolations of Gender in the English Novel*, the fourth book in the series, examines the traditional connection between women and the literary genre "romance." Her study questions this seemingly appropriate and "natural" linkage of gender and genre to discover a new relation that is held not in the content or subject matter of romance but rather in its structure. Romance fiction articulates an economy of desire that resists genre definitions (it is a site of disorder), and in so doing it represents what must necessarily be repressed in order for the genre as a system of representation to exist. The implications of this discovery are at least twofold: the dominant social and literary

culture derides, and thereby joins, women and romance; romance is the (false) consolation held out to the oppressed gender whose desire moves within—but also reaches beyond—an economy of (false) hopes that the dominant culture both offers and denies. In short, romance represents the Other to the novel: the novel “scapegoats” romance.

The observations that romance has been excluded and derided by the novel form and that women’s desire has been denied or derided by patriarchal culture are not, in themselves, surprising. Langbauer, however, examines an unremarked relation among these figures: Why and how does the system that excludes and derides also continually invoke romance, all the while denying that it does so? That is, how do women and romance represent the cultural system’s own repressed desires? Her answers are compelling. Informed by the work of Freud, Derrida, and Foucault, Langbauer’s book focuses on texts that reveal an awareness of the tensions between the genres of novel and romance. These tensions are always (although not always self-consciously) articulated in gendered terms. Analyzing works by George Meredith, Charlotte Lennox, Mary Wollstonecraft, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot, Langbauer demonstrates how suppressed forms—women, romance—return within the novel to deconstruct its hierarchies.

More provocatively, she speculates on *why* this return of the repressed occurs and what forms it takes. *Women and Romance* also challenges literary theory and criticism to examine how their own anxieties about the genre “romance” repress (but also invoke) anxieties about gender divisions and hierarchies. Even the most sophisticated analysis cannot help but replicate the repressive order of the forms it investigates and (as with feminist criticism) challenges. Langbauer warns us of “the danger of wishful satisfactions, the consolations offered us by totalizing systems that . . . neat images of women represent in miniature and draw us back into.” She subjects to radical critique the assumption that a system—any system—can be totalizing. Her book thereby opens an important question: Can a genre or gender represent total Otherness? Struggling with this issue, Langbauer urges feminism to recognize its implication in the systems—literary, social, cultural—it tries to dismantle.

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