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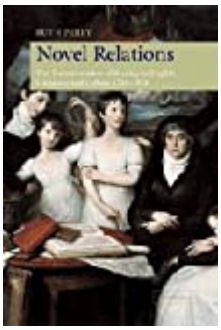

Ruth Perry. *Novel Relations: The Transformation of Kinship in English Literature and Culture 1748-1818.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. x + 465 pp. $80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-83694-4.

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Interpreting the Eighteenth-Century English Family

In this exhaustive exploration of several genres of fiction, Ruth Perry argues that a seismic change in the basis of kinship occurred in eighteenth-century England, from a primary kin group rooted in "consanguineal" ties to one rooted in "conjugal" ties. In other words: "the biologically given family into which one was born was gradually becoming secondary to the chosen family constructed by marriage" (p. 2). In Perry's view this was not merely representative, but actual. In order to support this claim, she cites two main economic causes which influenced traditional norms of marriage and reproduction. First, the commercialization of the agricultural sector in which the disappearance of small holdings and consolidation of large estates led to the rise of a waged economy and a drop in marriage age which rooted people in the conjugal rather than the consanguineal family. Second, she suggests that an emphasis on capital accumulation and resulting competition for resources for exchange rather than use undermined the pre-industrial reliance on kindred. This divided family loyalties and was felt in all classes, but had the most impact upon women because it gave men more independence and domestic power as husbands and fathers. Women also lost social and material power as wealth was increasingly concentrated in the male line. By the later eighteenth century, women were constructed "as private sexual partners rather than as co-producers of lineage" (p. 36). Each chapter presents another layer of "proof" for this thesis, by examining in detail the role of property in the family, the father-daughter, sister-brother, and husband-wife relationships, the significance of aunts (or "substitute mothers"), and the "incestuous family."

Perry interprets the novels' representations of these family relationships variously as reflections of historical phenomena, as consolatory fantasies about insoluble problems, and as nostalgic recreations of persistent myths. Most often she views literature's "obsessive concern with defining family membership" (p. 3) as compensatory, symbolizing the disappearance of traditional aspects of consanguineal family life. *Novel Relations* also, however, aims to be interdisciplinary, combining literary analysis with social history and some anthropology where it pertains to kinship relations. While admirable, this methodology is difficult to pull off since the interdisciplinary scholar is inevitably open to charges of over-

simplification and generalization in the "subsidiary" disciplines. For example, as a social historian, I am not persuaded by Perry's use of secondary historical material to "prove" her thesis. The main sections which deploy literary material to develop the thesis are rarely integrated with the supporting sub-sections which synthesize historical studies. Furthermore, these overviews rarely take into account recent arguments and developments in each of the fields. For instance, Perry's model of industrialization is largely a traditional one, which has been superseded by one that emphasizes the patchy chronological, regional, and socially stratified nature of industrial development.[1]

More recently, economic historians have turned to consumption, a field which Perry rarely touches on, yet which would offer her potentially important insights into the elite women she focuses upon, offering in particular somewhat contradictory findings to her assertions that women's relationship to property was diminishing over the eighteenth century.[2] Likewise, apart from Naomi Tadmor, Perry appears to be unaware of work by a recent generation of scholars such as Elizabeth Foyster, David Turner, and myself.[3] This leads to oversights that undermine Perry's overall thesis. For example, she argues that "privatised marriage" put women "in the power of their husbands as if marriage had the alchemical effect of transforming them into property at the same time as it made over the property that they owned to their new masters" (p. 197). Yet current research into marital relationships problematizes the notion that men had increasing power as husbands and fathers, and reveals that wives frequently retained a strong sense of possession for property during marriage and often removed such goods at separation as well as at widowhood.[4] Other recent findings also question Perry's interpretation of the emotionally fraught father-daughter relationships so common in novels. She argues that it represents the real termination of fathers' responsibility for their daughters once their daughters married. By the later eighteenth century, "the responsibility of fathers for daughters was so far attenuated that the fantasy of paternal responsibility was the subject of nostalgic yearning" (p. 90). However, work on marital conflict and separation shows that women consistently returned to their families of origin for support during or after marital dispute or breakdown.[5] Likewise the "interference" of the community in marriage did not become more unusual as the century wore on (p. 201), but remained a consistent feature of married life into the Victorian period.

Sophisticated and nuanced though it is, Ruth Perry's model of change cannot fail to remind historians of the family in Lawrence Stone's sweeping narrative of transformation in family and kin relations. Stone's three successive stages of family types began with the pre-industrial one rooted in a wider kin network, where marriages were forged for pragmatic economic reasons. They ended with a more "modern," nuclear, companionate family that had evolved by the later eighteenth century. In it spousal romantic love was prized and young people were given freedom in selecting spouses for reasons of affection.[6] Perry disassociates herself from Stone, observing that he failed to place the family in the context of political and economic forces, that consanguinity and conjugality family forms could both be nuclear, that contemporaries understood "family" to consist of wider members such as servants and apprentices, and that economics remained a vital factor in the motivation for eighteenth-century matrimony. Yet there are similarities. Both tend to see family types and relationships as successive stages and oppositional. Perry claims "that consanguineal and conjugal loyalties might be experienced as mutually exclusive" (p. 18). Yet it has been shown that traditional notions of lineage could exist side by side with newer fashionable ideals about marital affection and sentimentalized family relationships.[7] Another theme of *Novel Relations* is that the exchange of women in marriage originally served the purpose of building alliances, but transformed in the period to being the means by which property was accumulated. Thus women obtained more power in their new conjugal families rather than in their families of origin. Of course, it could be asked whether such ambitions were ever oppositional and it might be suggested that women served a variety of functions within the family according to age, life-cycle, and marital status.

Perry has identified some fascinating and tantalizing familial and marital themes arising repeatedly in eighteenth-century fiction, but they still need further explanation for social and cultural historians. I am unconvinced that Perry's diverse findings about the family in literature can all be fitted into the same overarching thesis that the nature of kinship shifted from consanguineal to conjugal. Nor is there adequate evidence in the historical record to support her belief that this shift also occurred in experience as well as representation. The view that a "traditional" kinship system was being lost in the eighteenth century and mourned in fiction simply does not match studies of nineteenth-century kin networks that see them as adaptable structures that enabled individuals to accommodate or facilitate the requirements of

new environments and circumstances.[8] In some ways, Perry's ambitious thesis is as debatable and controversial as Stone's original model of transformation in the family. This is no bad thing however, if it means that *Novel Relations* stimulates further debate and opens up the still under-researched nature of eighteenth-century family life to scrutiny and to new directions of analysis by social and economic historians. Particularly crucial lines of enquiry, for example, would follow Perry's innovative lead by studying men as fathers and brothers, and women as daughters, siblings, and aunts.

Notes

[1]. M. Berg and P. Hudson, "Rehabilitating the Industrial Revolution," *Economic History Review* 45 (1992): pp. 24-50.

[2]. A. Vickery, "Women and the World of Goods: A Lancashire Consumer and Her Possessions, 1751-81," in *Consumption and the World of Goods: Consumption and Society in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. J. Brewer and R. Porter (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 274-301; and H. Berry, "Prudent Luxury: The Metropolitan Tastes of Judith Baker, Durham Gentlewoman," in *Women and Urban Life in Eighteenth-Century England*, ed. R. Sweet and P. Lane (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), pp. 31-56.

[3]. J. Bailey, *Unquiet Lives: Marriage and Marriage Breakdown in England, 1660-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); E. Foyster, "Creating a Veil of Silence? Politeness and Marital Violence in the English Household," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 6th ser., 12 (2002): pp. 395-415; idem, "At the Limits of Liberty: Married Women and Confinement in Eighteenth-Century England," *Continuity and Change* 17, no. 1 (2002): pp. 39-62; and D. Turner, *Fashioning Adultery: Gender, Sex and Civility in England, 1660-1740 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). [See Tim Hitchcock, "Review of David M. Turner,* Fashioning Adultery: Gender, Sex and Civility in England, 1660-1740_," H-Albion, H-Net Reviews, August, 2004, `http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=50981095653724.`

[4]. J. Bailey, "Favoured or Oppressed? Married Women, Property and 'Coverture' in England 1660-1800," *Continuity and Change* 17, no. 3 (2002): pp. 351-72; M. Finn, "Women, Consumption and Coverture in England, c 1760-1860," *Historical Journal* 39, no. 3 (1996): pp. 702-722; and M. Hunt, "Wives and Marital 'Rights' in the Court of Exchequer in the Early Eighteenth Century," in *Londinopolis: Essays in the Cultural and Social history of Early Modern London*, ed. P. Griffiths and M. S. R. Jenner (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp. 107-129.

[5]. E. Foyster, "Parenting Was for Life, Not Just for Childhood: The Role of Parents in the Married Lives of Their Children in Early Modern England," *History* 86 (2001): pp. 313-327.

[6]. L. Stone, *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500 -1800* (abridged ed., New York: Harper & Row, 1977, 1979).

[7]. K. Retford, "Sensibility and Genealogy in the Eighteenth-Century Family Portrait: The Collection at Kedleston Hall," *Historical Journal* 46, no. 3 (2003): pp. 533-560.

[8]. T. K. Haraven, "The History of the Family and the Complexity of Social Change," *American Historical Review* 96, no. 1 (1991): pp. 95-124.