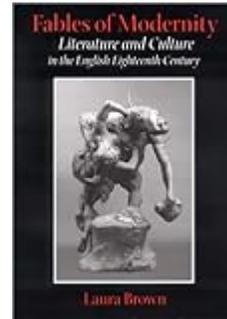




Laura Brown. *Fables of Modernity: Literature and Culture in the English Eighteenth Century.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001. xii + 273 pp. \$23.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8014-8844-3; \$62.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-3756-4.



Reviewed by Brian Cowan (Department of History, Yale University)

Published on H-Albion (January, 2003)

Telling Stories about the Eighteenth Century

Telling Stories about the Eighteenth Century

The eighteenth century has long been at the forefront of debates about the emergence and nature of modernity in Great Britain and indeed the world as a whole. Looking back from the nineteenth century, it seemed to many that the world had been transformed into something radically different from the “traditional,” pre-modern social order that had once prevailed. The most obvious culprit for this great transformation was the French Revolution, but other revolutions were quickly added to the suspect roster. In 1837, the French socialist Louis Blanqui coined the phrase *r=volution industrielle* to sum up the social and economic changes that had transformed Britain in the previous century. The phrase stuck and by the later nineteenth century, Britain was assumed to have experienced an industrial revolution that was a social and economic counterpart to the political revolution that transformed France at roughly the same time.[1] Twentieth-century historians added new revolutions to their understanding of the eighteenth century on a regular basis. We have now read arguments for eighteenth-century financial and commercial revolutions; military-imperial rev-

olutions; revolutionary changes in class consciousness; the forging of a new national identity (in some accounts English, in others British); a news and information revolution; a revolution in religious life often deemed “secularization”; and revolutions in family life and affective relations between and amongst the sexes. Given this inflation of revolutionary honors given to the eighteenth century, it is no wonder that Laura Brown takes it as accepted that “historians find that the period after 1660 marks a new epoch, in which a wide range of major shifts come together” (p. 8).

Fables of Modernity assumes that the eighteenth century was indeed England’s first “modern” century and it proceeds to explore the ramifications of that modernity in the literary culture of the period. Brown’s three rubrics of choice are expansion, exchange, and alterity, each of which she finds echoed through a number of literary texts by writers such as Jonathan Swift, Alexander Pope, and Samuel Johnson, as well as less canonical works. In each of these cases, Brown finds a number of “fables” which address the responses of the eighteenth-century English imagination to the problems of imperial

growth, economic life, and cultural difference that she finds vexing her subjects. The book attempts to establish the “cultural fable” as a heuristic critical category and it uses this conceit to explore a number of important themes in the writings of the English long eighteenth century. In each of these themes, Brown argues that her cultural fable can be understood as a means by which the eighteenth-century imagination wrestled with and attempted to represent the anxieties of an incipient modernity. Modernity for Brown seems to consist primarily of three things: capitalism, imperialism, and racism. Her take on eighteenth-century culture is decidedly Whiggish in its emphasis on the modernity of the period: her references to the historiography of the eighteenth century fail to engage with an alternative “revisionist” understanding of the eighteenth century in which traditional allegiances to church, crown, and aristocracy remain key terms for understanding the English social order. Just as “new historicist” critics of Renaissance literature have tended to ignore the revisionist historiography of early modern England, historicist critics of the new eighteenth century like Brown have also largely declined to engage with historical challenges to Whiggish interpretations of eighteenth-century history.[2] But Brown’s Whiggery is hardly a triumphal one. The triumph of representative government, the emergence of religious toleration, and the persistence of the rule of law are absent from this account. Her English modernity is defined by an unstable and capricious capitalist economy that also accommodated slave labor, imperial expansion, and the subjugation of conquered peoples entailed by that empire. This is the Whiggery taught by the class of 1968 rather than that championed by the class of 1832.[3]

Brown’s readings adeptly capture a number of important themes in the literary culture of the eighteenth century. In her discussion of the “fable of the city sewer,” she links the well known “excremental vision” of Augustan writers such as Swift and Pope to a fascination with urban sanitation systems; her “fable of torrents and oceans” identifies a persistent concern with the exploitation of naval power for commercial and imperial advancement in English poetry from the age of the Navigation Acts. Brown revisits the “fable of Lady Credit,” a popular prosopopeical device of the early eighteenth century used to represent the financial markets, and she offers new readings of Pope’s famous female personification of “Dulness” along with what she calls the “fable of the native prince” in which cultural and racial difference was represented to English readers in a sympathetic way. The book concludes with a consideration of the

ways in which the difference between humanity and the animal world was articulated in fables of the “nonhuman being.” There is no doubt that these are all indeed important topoi in the literary and cultural world of eighteenth-century England and Brown does a service to her readers in bringing them to the forefront of critical attention.

It is less clear that these topoi are related in such a formal way as to constitute “fables,” and Brown tends rather to assert than to demonstrate the modernity of her critical subjects. Brown’s concept of fable is distinctive insofar as it claims it has “a narrative trajectory that moves beyond the local or static effect of a trope or a figure” (p. 2). Precisely what sort of narrative direction these fables are supposed to possess remains unclear in Brown’s analysis. Although she claims that not every trope or figure can constitute the protagonist for a “cultural fable,” the criteria by which the particular use of any one figure is included or excluded within this critical purview remain frustratingly vague. Why the story of Oroonoko should be included as part of the fable of the native prince, but the use of the same theme for rather different purposes by Montesquieu in his *Lettres Persanes* (1721) or Oliver Goldsmith in his *Citizen of the World* (1762) should not, seems to depend more on the particular interests of this critic rather than any distinct and formal criteria for a “cultural fable” (pp. 181-182).

It remains to be seen whether other critics will find the concept of a cultural fable as Brown deploys it here to be helpful in their understanding of Augustan literature or culture. Insofar as Brown wants to use the subjects of her study as evidence for the “modernity” of the eighteenth century, the case also remains far from closed. Of course the period did indeed see important changes in state finance, the size and political importance of empire, and the conceptualization of racial identity, and Brown usefully explores the ways in which these issues were addressed in Augustan literary culture. But these changes were not necessarily so revolutionary as to constitute such a clear and decisive break with the past that they may be understood to inaugurate English modernity. Swift, Pope, and Johnson cannot be yoked into service as obvious spokesmen for modernity any more than they can be unproblematically labeled backward-looking and nostalgic Jacobites.[4] The great interest of the literary and the cultural productions of the eighteenth century derives not from the ways in which they “represent the irresistible force of modernity” (p. 46) but rather from the incessant tension between both the traditional and the modern that persists throughout the period. It is unfortunate that Brown succeeds in telling only one side of

this complex story in her book.

Notes

[1]. David Cannadine, "The Past and the Present in the English Industrial Revolution, 1880-1980," *Past and Present* 103 (1984): pp. 114-131.

[2]. Although commonly associated with the works of J. C. D. Clark, most notably his *English Society 1660-1832: Ideology, Social Structure and Political Practice under the Old Regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), the persistence of an English old regime is also a theme of less tendentious works such as Roy Porter, *English Society in the Eighteenth Century*, rev. ed. (London: Penguin, 1990); and Richard Price, *British Society, 1680-1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). For further reflections on this issue, see Brian Cowan "Refig-

uring Revisionisms," *History of European Ideas* (forthcoming).

[3]. Two very different analyses of these varieties of Whig historical writing may be found in J. C. D. Clark, *Revolution and Rebellion: State and Society in England in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); and Peter Lake, "Retrospective: Wentworth's Political World in Revisionist and Post-Revisionist Perspective," in *The Political World of Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford, 1621-1641*, ed. J. F. Merritt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 252-83.

[4]. For recent debates on the relative importance of Jacobitism in understanding eighteenth-century English literature, see the articles collected in the special issue of *ELH: English Literary History* 64:4 (1997).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Brian Cowan. Review of Brown, Laura, *Fables of Modernity: Literature and Culture in the English Eighteenth Century*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. January, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7101>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.