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 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 oversimplification 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 un-
dermine 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 rela-
tionships problematizes the notion that men had in-
creasing 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 respon-
sibility was the subject of nostalgic yearning" (p. 90).
However, work on marital conflict and separation shows
that women consistently returned to their families of ori-
gin for support during or after marital dispute or break-
down.[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 trans-
formation 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, compan-
nionate 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 fam-
ily in the context of political and economic forces, that
consanguinity and conjugal family forms could both
be nuclear, that contemporaries understood "family" to
consist of wider members such as servants and appren-
tices, 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 rela-
tionships 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 ex-
ist side by side with newer fashionable ideals about marit-
ial 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 be-
ning the means by which property was accumulated. Thus
women obtained more power in their new conjugal fam-
ilies rather than in their families of origin. Of course, it
could be asked whether such ambitions were ever oppo-
sitional 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 tantaliz-
ing familial and marital themes arising repeatedly in
eighteenth-century fiction, but they still need further ex-
planation for social and cultural historians. I am uncon-
vinced that Perry's diverse findings about the family in
literature can all be fitted into the same overarching the-
sis that the nature of kinship shifted from consanguineal
to conjugal. Nor is there adequate evidence in the his-
torical record to support her belief that this shift also oc-
curred 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 indi-
viduals to accommodate or facilitate the requirements of
new environments and circumstances.[8] In some ways,
Perry's ambitious thesis is as debatable and controver-
sial 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 inno-
vative lead by studying men as fathers and brothers, and
women as daughters, siblings, and aunts.

Notes

[1]. M. Berg and P. Hudson, "Rehabilitating the In-
pp. 24-50.


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

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


URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11824

Copyright © 2006 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.msu.edu.