

Julie Park. *The Self and It: Novel Objects in Eighteenth-Century England*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010. xxix + 275 pp. \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8047-5696-9.

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The Consuming Self in Eighteenth-Century Culture

Twenty-some years ago John Bender suggested that the eighteenth-century novel resembled a prison; in this new study, Julie Park counters with the proposition that the eighteenth-century novel resembles a hat. More seriously, Park's *The Self and It* proposes a new interpretation of the eighteenth-century subject, staking its claim on the supposedly novel and pervasive imposition of consumer objects on the eighteenth-century citizen and reader's sense of identity. Enlightened subjects loved their stuff: crockery, clothing, books, and—perhaps most important for Park's thesis—dolls, puppets, and automata of various kinds. *The Self and It* attempts, ambitiously and with considerable ingenuity, to connect these aspects of eighteenth-century English life to a thorough restructuring of the age's characteristic ways of producing the self.

A central concept for most of the book is the “fetish,” understood at times from a Marxist perspective as a consumer object endowed with quasi-magical powers, and at times in Freudian terms as an erotically charged fragment that stands in for a missing—and indeed imaginary—whole. The former understanding animates the opening chapter on clothing and other consumer goods, while the latter is deployed in an extended discussion of Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748). There is less overt mention of fetishism in the chapters on dolls and mannequins, although it seems clear that the psychological mechanisms that drive eighteenth-century interest in such artifacts are much like the fetishistic impulse behind contemporary attitudes toward fashion. In all such cases, the central concern is the displacement of the imagined self or

subject onto an object of some kind. In the concluding chapters, the focus switches more to the Freudian concept of the uncanny, although there is continuity with the previous discussions in that the uncanny concerns itself mostly with violations of the boundary between animate and inanimate things.

The success of Park's argument is mixed. Some of her readings of familiar texts, like Daniel Defoe's *Roxana* (1724) or the novels of Frances Burney, shed fresh light on their subjects; *Roxana* in particular profits from close attention to clothing, especially the Oriental costume that furnishes not only a motive for many of the heroine's adventures but also the pseudonym that the author uses for his title. The discussion of Burney—one of the strongest sections of the book—deals effectively with embarrassment and automatism as traits of Burney's characters and of the writer herself. However, I was unconvinced by the argument that *Clarissa* serves as a symbol of Lovelace's mother's absent penis, and the brief chapter devoted to Charlotte Chark seems underdeveloped. Park is sometimes cavalier with her details, too: the Burney chapter betrays an inadequate understanding of free indirect discourse, and the *Clarissa* chapter contains odd slips (Lovelace does not drug the heroine's beer, but her tea, for example). Jean-Jacques Rousseau makes a cameo appearance in a later discussion where the *Lettre à D'Alembert*—a 1758 pamphlet that helped to confirm Rousseau's eccentricity and disconnection from mainstream enlightened thought—is presented as somehow typical of the period's attitudes toward women.

Park's vision overall is remarkably bleak. While it is fairly routine to bemoan the bad effects of consumer culture on our best selves (and much of Park's critique reads like an analysis of the twenty-first century as well as of the eighteenth), it is less usual to extend the rigor to high art and enlightened reason. To read the eighteenth-century novel as an engine of inauthenticity, and Richardson in particular as a convoluted fetishist, is to take a very dim view of the period's culture. Add to this suspicion an underlying dismissal of the Enlightenment and all it stands for, and the age emerges as a particularly hellish display of the human faculty for alienation.

Pace the jacket blurb, this book is awkwardly written and frequently obscure. Philosophizing about subjectiv-

ity is a difficult task, so one should not expect a volume on the topic to be easy reading; nonetheless, when the reader trips over puzzling pronoun references, inexplicable redundancies, faults in agreement, and an idiosyncratic way with prepositions (particularly, in this case, "in"), it is hard to separate the essential obscurity of the material from very local infelicities of style. More and better editing would have helped a lot.

In sum, I expect that this study will find favor with readers who share the author's commitment to Freudian inflections and general hostility to the Enlightenment. More traditional scholars will mine it for its valuable details, but will likely be indifferent at best to the overall thesis and tone.

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