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Scott Paul Gordon. *The Practice of Quixotism: Postmodern Theory and Eighteenth Century Women's Writing*. New York: Palgrave, 2006. 240pp. ISBN: 978-1-4039-7444-0.

In *The Practice of Quixotism*, Scott Paul Gordon describes some key traits of the Cervantine hero in the protagonists of texts by eighteenth-century women. Some of these texts (chief among them Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote*) have been the ground for much scholarship on picaresque characterization in the literature of the Enlightenment; others, like Sophia Lee's *The Recess*, are less commonly catalogued as quixotic narratives. Gordon supports his mode of analysis through an interesting interpretation of the conflict between fantasy and reality in the interiority of the quixotic character. In Gordon's assessment, the way authors position such characters in the texts points to a rather vexing relationship between subjectivity and perception. Since he chooses women's writing as his subject and draws on criticism of that writing from feminist recovery projects, his assertion that Enlightenment thinking views female subjectivity and perception as already picaresque supplements his examination of that relationship. In addition, Gordon argues that this relationship's complexities also energize much postmodern theory.

The female Quixote is perhaps the perfect solipsist as Gordon describes her; she believes unshakably in the reality of her own perceptions, however fantastic or ill at ease with the dominant worldview those perceptions may be. Don Quixote's belief in the infallibility of her own ways of seeing and interpreting the world makes her a site of mockery and derision for readers (and for her literary compatriots within the world of the text). The texts seem to support the assumption of an "objective" truth to which the don Quixote, unlike other characters in the narrative, is denied access, either through her own repression of this "truth" or through her inability to perceive it. Gordon perceives a misplaced faith in objectivity in such *Quijote* narratives and in eighteenth-century

thought at large. Because faith in objectivity was particularly important to the rational expressions most highly valued in the eighteenth century, it is unsurprising that Gordon is able to couch his criticism in the texts of that time. What is perhaps most surprising about this book is that the author connects his interpretation of women's writing in the Age of Reason to the condition of indeterminability that marks identity and perception in the postmodern era.

In the first and second chapters Gordon develops a description of what he terms "orthodox" Quixote narratives. He notes that "orthodox narratives encourage [readers] to reaffirm their own epistemological superiority" (6) to don Quixote, whereas the more innovative narratives use the trope to unorthodox ends. This innovation requires that "narratives trick readers into seeing things as don Quixote does" (6). Pushing back against a stream of feminist critiques, Gordon asserts that reading orthodox female Quixotes as proto-feminist characters may suggest more about the critic than the text. In his use of Lennox's titular character, Arabella, to provide evidence for his claim, he argues that the destabilization of patriarchal order arising from the heroine's indulgence in romantic fancy is overturned by Lennox in the novel's dénouement. Because Arabella, cured of her quixotism, is "restored" to reason and married to the man of her father's choosing, any agency derived from her fanciful behavior is suspended by the novel's end. After conducting a close reading of a some seven orthodox *Quijote* narratives, Gordon marshals a reasonable objection to some more prolific readings of the trope. These objections serve as evidence for his claim that the orthodox *Quijote* narrative is often more a tool of the eighteenth-century ideology of scientific objectivism than a mode of female subversion of that ideology. Gordon considers how the female Quixote might be deployed to counter Enlightenment thought in much the same way that postmodern theory does in the third through the sixth chapters of *The Practice of Quixotism*.

His attention to Sarah Fielding's *David Simple* and its sequel extends his argument about orthodoxy and ideology to an analysis that sees the collapse of seeming into being (a hallmark of the quixotic worldview) as reflected in an authorial fixation on suspicion and prudence. In examining how *David Simple's* narrator paradoxically describes prudence as a virtue and a vice, Gordon returns to feminist criticism of the novels in order to gender his invective against subversive readings of orthodox quixotism. Gordon observes that the representation of women according to the Quixote trope fueled the "gendering of trust and suspicion in Eighteenth Century thought" (88). Gordon repeats this alignment of suspicion with vice, and of imprudence with innocence, in his reading of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's poetic response to Swift's "The Lady's Dressing Room." Gordon describes how Montagu and Swift's texts demonstrate the hermeneutics of enlightenment thought as rebuked by an almost postmodern slippage between writing subjects and narrating subjects. According to Gordon, this slippage collapses masculinity and objectivity into a singular ideology. Montagu's response suggests a suture to the narrative perspective of a subjugated female narrator, and thus that response might be more productively read against the particular brand of

patriarchy espoused by Swift, Pope, and Johnson than Lennox's novel.

Gordon's reading of Sophia Lee's *The Recess* shows how narration and identity can be manipulated to make of quixotism an infectious contaminant of narrative reality. Because of the ambiguity of the narrative structure—the novel includes two epistles with conflicting accounts of the same events—no singular truth can be interpreted in the novel. In an attempt to discern which narration to trust, readers become increasingly more aware of the ways that the texts connect and contrast suspicion and vice, until the differentiation of those oppositional categories evolves into a differentiation between objects in the same category. This use of structure to make Quixotes of all the major characters points toward the indeterminability that Gordon sites in his theoretical framework. Perhaps the most innovative use of this framework is revealed in the book's epilogue "Beyond Quixotism?: Quixotism and Contemporary Theory," where Gordon explains how "rational modernism" (a coinage adopted from Luckás) is a quixotic structure in itself.

Scholars working on eighteenth-century studies, women's authorship and historically oriented examinations of contemporary theory may well find *The Practice of Quixotism* a valuable contribution to their fields. Gordon's focus on texts that have not received a great deal of attention promises to make the book an especially interesting read for those following the recovery of women's writing. The impressive, if less than exhaustive, history of British criticism of Cervantes from his contemporaries to the early nineteenth century demonstrates his deft hand at research. The final three chapters and the ambitious epilogue show his erudition in synthesizing different modes of critical thought; so keen is Gordon's interest in this synthesis that the text might also be read an abbreviated examination of philosophies of perception from Bacon to Gadamer, and of paradigms of subjectivity from Burke to Harraway.

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