
BOOK REVIEWS

William A. Cohen. *Sex Scandal, The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1996. 256p.

John, Sutherland. *Is Heathcliff a Murderer? Puzzles in 19th-Century Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996. 258p.

John, Sutherland. *Can Jane Eyre Be Happy? More Puzzles in Classic Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997. 232p.

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Very different in some ways, these books nonetheless have at least two things in common: they focus on Victorian fiction (and a bit of the territory before and after, in Sutherland's second book), and they quickly moved beyond academic circles to receive acclaim, and for Cohen, even notoriety, in the popular press.

Although *Sex Scandal* has provoked righteous indignation from some, less resisting readers will find in Cohen witty and insightful consideration of the unspeakability of Victorian sex/Victorian texts. He looks particularly at four texts, *Great Expectations*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *The Eustace Diamonds*, and *The Portrait of Mr. W.H.* and at "an archtypal scandal, the case of Ernest Boulton and Frederick Park" (73), who were arrested in 1870 for cross-dressing and then charged with sodomy. In his chapter on Oscar Wilde, Cohen also discusses the prosecution's attempts to use literature as damning evidence in Wilde's criminal trials, and Wilde's defense, including the argument that letters he wrote to Lord Alfred Douglas were literary texts and therefore not susceptible to the determinacy required of courtroom evidence.

While the comments I've read in the popular press seem excited most by the chapter that discusses masturbation in Dickens, "Manual Conduct in *Great Expectations*," I was personally more stimulated by those on *The Mill on the Floss* and *The Eustace Diamonds*, particularly the former, with its narrative complexities as Eliot condemns the prurient and destructive interest in gossip by the novel's characters and yet appeals to the reader's simultaneous sense of superiority to

scandal and fascination with it. Eliot sees the St. Ogg's gossipmongers as vulgar, Cohen argues provocatively,

both because it judges its victim on appearance and because it speaks on behalf of what it thinks others wish to hear. Precisely to the extent that she condemns this practice, moreover, Eliot depicts the savory pleasures to be had in humiliating one's neighbor. As much as the narrator evokes scandal's disciplinary function, that is to say, the novelist relishes showing us its titillations. The most earnest of Victorian novelists is thus the one to afford us the fullest account of scandal's flesh-tingling delights. (143)

Cohen analyzes the pervasiveness of public opinion in the narrative, from the judgment of Mr. Rappit, the hairdresser, on the child Maggie's self-administered haircut to St. Ogg's condemnation of the adult runaway who still fails to anticipate the role, or even read the presence, of public opinion. He also examines the gendered nature of St. Ogg's judgments throughout the novel (not merely in the famous section on *The World's Wife*), and the internal contradictions of Eliot's narrator on the matter of maxims.

"Trollope's Trollop," Chapter 5, argues that the narrator in *The Eustace Diamonds* is, on the other hand, complicit with the scandal-loving public that forms the audience within the novel for Lizzie Eustace's manipulation of both the diamonds and her lovers. And, finally, "Indeterminate Wilde," Chapter 6, brings together Cohen's arguments about indeterminacy in literature (and, for Wilde, in criticism as well) and Wilde's resistance therefore to the court's attempt to determine his sexual guilt through textual "evidence."

Given the scholarly nature of the book, there is a particular irony in the way in which this book on scandal has aroused precisely the responses that Cohen says scandal provokes; which only goes to prove the point of the "Afterword," that "we still belong within the culture of scandal."

The popularity of Sutherland's best sellers comes from a different but no less delightful human pastime, the pleasure of solving puzzles. He discusses not only the Victorian texts referred to in his titles, but some that Cohen analyzes in more detail (*Great Expectations*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*), along with Anne Brontë's *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and *Fanny Hill*, *Tom Jones*, *Mansfield Park*, *Emma*, *Pickwick Papers*, *Oliver Twist*, *Bleak House*, *Adam Bede*, *Middlemarch*, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Mary Barton*, *Heart of Midlothian*, *Frankenstein*, *Jude the Obscure*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *Mrs. Dalloway* (to give only a partial list), plus a few American works, like *The Scarlet Letter*, *The Yellow Wall-Paper*, and *The Last of the Mohicans*. Most are texts that many British readers would know well, to judge by the frequent allusions to them in the daily press there, and that would be

familiar to American readers too, from reading and from television and film adaptations.

Some of Sutherland's literary puzzles can be spotted only by the astute reader, which Sutherland certainly is. How many times have I taught *Vanity Fair* or *Pickwick Papers* and yet never noticed Amelia's multiplying pianos or wondered from what Mr. Pickwick has retired? Does it matter? Well, yes. Sutherland is not merely presenting the reader with a game of literary Trivial Pursuit. Each essay makes a significant point about the context of the work, and it does so lucidly, engagingly, wittily. Author of numerous books on nineteenth-century fiction, including *Victorian Novelists and Publishers* and *Victorian Fiction: Writers, Publishers, Readers*, and biographies of Mrs. Humphrey Ward and Sir Walter Scott, Sutherland demonstrates in *Is Heathcliff a Murderer?* and *Can Jane Eyre be Happy?* that he is not only a leading literary historian but a thoroughly engaged and engaging reader/writer. No wonder the Dillons in Chelsea, where I tried to buy both books in 1997, was sold out, although the shop assistant assured me that 30 more copies were on order and due any day.

Even when I disagree with Sutherland's reading, he makes me think again. For instance, *Can Jane Eyre Be Happy?* includes an essay on Eliot's *Adam Bede* that, I think, misses an important point or two in the text. "Why doesn't the Reverend Irwine speak up for Hetty?" proposes that Mr. Irwine is so committed to protecting the establishment, as represented by Hetty's seducer, Arthur Donnithorne, that he neglects obvious and important measures that might have "won [her] a full pardon, or at least a light custodial sentence in England" (125). In coming to this conclusion, Sutherland claims that Arthur has been summoned because the old Squire is "having a spot of bother with one of his tenants." What exactly is that spot? It must be the set-to in Chapter 32, when "Mrs. Poyser has her say out." But why would the Squire wait from late summer (when Mrs. Poyser makes her defiant speech) until February to call for Arthur's help? Why call upon the grandson with whom he is so reluctant to share either funds or responsibility? And what would/could Arthur do? When Mrs. Poyser's speech first became the subject of parish gossip, Irwine had told his mother that if the Squire tried to take revenge by evicting the Poyser, he and Arthur must "move heaven and earth" to prevent it. But the cards are all in the hands of the old curmudgeon. In late February, with Lady-Day on the horizon, if the Squire doesn't intend to evict the Poyser, but swallow his pride instead, nothing more need be said. If he wishes to evict, his grandson is unlikely to help. And besides, although Sutherland is right that the reader hears of the Squire's summons only when the Rector tells Adam Bede of it (to keep him from going needlessly to Ireland), shortly afterward, Mrs. Irwine

comments on the Squire's death: "So the old gentleman's fidgetiness and low spirits, which made him send for Arthur in that sudden way, really meant something" (Chapter 40). Nothing to do with the Poysers.

As for concealing Arthur's role in the catastrophe, Irwine as his friend and father-substitute does indeed show more sympathy with Arthur than many of the other inhabitants of Hayslope do. But the narrator also records Irwine's agreement that Adam's demand for Arthur to be exposed is "just," and adds that Irwine believes exposure inevitable: "it was scarcely to be supposed that Hetty would persist to the end in her obstinate silence" (Chapter 40).

Sutherland's point is that given the 1799-1800 setting of *Adam Bede*, the Squire and the Parson might be concerned about revolutionary sentiments slipping across the Channel even as far as Hayslope, and that the Parson fears public exposure of Arthur at Hetty's trial might taint the "whole English squirearchy, and the complex mutual fealties which go with it." But the novel gives no evidence that even the neighbors of Hayslope who sympathize with the Poysers are upset at Arthur's deception of his "loyal retainer" *per se* (i.e., Adam)—even if they would blink, as Sutherland suggests, at "rogering peasant girls."

Other essays provoke other disputes with Sutherland's interpretations, but they also bring attention to the cultural context for fiction (including also Fanny Hill's condoms and Mrs. Dalloway's taxi), the impact of publishing practices on authors' composition practices (Amelia Sedley's pianos or the idiosyncrasies of time in *Barchester Towers*), and other critical questions. And they remind us that criticism need not be dull or jargon-ridden. As Sutherland's reception in the U.K. shows, it can even be popular.

While Sutherland and Cohen approach literary criticism rather differently, the works of both testify to the pleasures of the text. ✨