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Belief Suspended: Review of Eighteenth-Century Fiction and the Reinvention of Wonder

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1REVIEW OF

Eighteenth-Century Fiction and The Reinvention of Wonder (OUP, 2014)

Since Stephen Greenblatt published *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* in 1991, a flurry of books has appeared that examines the responses of early-modern spectators, readers and thinkers to novelty. Often, novelties appear threatening or transgressive because they unsettle the pieties of conventional institutions. Roger Shattuck's *Forbidden Knowledge: From Prometheus to Pornography* (1996), for example, rehearses the age-long tradition of sequestering or concealing information deemed unsuitable by conventional authorities for public consumption. Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park's wonderful *Wonders and the Order of Nature* (1998) traces the proximity that moral commentators detected of wonder to greed and lust, reprehensible appetites around reprehensibly by strange phenomena. One of many case studies, Dennis Todd's relatively early *Imagining Monsters: Miscreations of the Self in Eighteenth-Century England* (1995) explores contemporary reactions to the surprising birth of seventeen and a half rabbits and parts of a cat from the enterprising Mary Toft, an event that seemed to challenge the nature of human identity itself and to hold up for scorn the appetite of medical experts for the unnatural. My own *Curiosity: A Cultural History of Early Modern Inquiry* (2001) traces the discourse condemning curiosity that surrounded the questioning of the unusual from the late Renaissance to the Regency.

Novelties also present new ways of studying and understanding the physical world, and profiting by such study. Among other fine studies of the selling of the strange, Paula Findlen's *Merchants and Marvels: Commerce, Science, and Art in Early Modern Europe* (2002), and Arthur McGregor *Curiosity and Enlightenment* (2007), among other studies of early science, pursue this story by tracing the materials of the miraculous that appear in early-modern European

museums, *wunderkammern*, curiosity cabinets and scientific repositories. All of these, and many other such scholarly studies, ask what happens to knowledge, feeling and culture itself when truth appears stranger than fiction.

In this new study of the nature of wonder, marvels, curiosity and fiction, Sara Tindal Kareem takes the quest into the psychology of the reader of eighteenth-century fiction. Her *Eighteenth-Century Fiction and The Reinvention of Wonder* locates novelties in quotidian experience: it is precisely the events and phenomena that appear in an empirically-observed and described everyday world that evoke the wonder of the observer. Using eighteenth-century phenomenology and philosophy, the book argues that eighteenth-century fiction “solicits wonder at and about the real, that is, at and about everyday experience” (1). In many ways, this is a book more about the development of the readerly response of the willing suspension of disbelief than it is about the techniques of fiction, and indeed Tindal Kareem draws heavily on contemporary and eighteenth-century cognitive theory, particularly David Hume’s devastating attack on the fallacy of causation, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Tindal Kareem takes on the crisis of belief that she sees as marking the transition to modernity in eighteenth-century Britain, as the New Science and exploration challenged the old pieties that explained the nature of the world and the universe. In particular, she examines the kind of disbelief—of wonder—evoked by the new genre of the novel, a genre that both engaged its readers in participatory disbelief and enjoined them to watch the marvelous in action and character. Tindal Kareem maintains that, as the genre stabilizes during the eighteenth century, the wavering between skepticism and belief that marked readers’ reactions to fiction mutates into a safe space of voluntary, hermetically-sealed, and ultimately insincere belief.

Chapter One grounds the later discussion of wonder’s narrative techniques by addressing

travel literature, natural philosophy and Protestant spiritual practices as prototypes of wonder literature. The organization of subsequent chapters dramatizes Tindal Kareem's enterprise to identify the ways in which realistic fiction incorporates wonder-producing effects by juxtaposing canonical works conventionally lauded by critics for their distance from the marvelous with other texts labeled commentaries on the marvelous. The main technique that she examines to illustrate the way apparently empirical texts deploy and evoke wonder is defamiliarization. This she sees operating in a myriad of ways via strategies of "delayed decoding; suspenseful plot; estranging language; and switching between different narrative points of view" (30). Of these, "delayed decoding proves to me the most cogent and intriguing: defined as the empirical description of a familiar phenomenon that refuses to identify it until the end of the passage, it allows authors to represent the unremarkable as astonishing. The Lilliputian exploration of Gulliver's watch, for example in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, or Robinson's amazed encounter with the sprouting wheat growing where none grew before in Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* exemplify this technique.

The subsequent chapters explore specific texts to mount a two-pronged argument that traces historical changes in the role of wonder and the narrative techniques employed in selected prose fictions. In chapter two, perhaps the most compelling, Tindal Kareem takes on what she terms the "epistemological uncertainty" (31) of the early eighteenth-century, an uncertainty bolstered and justified by a Puritan theology that figures life as a ship often headed for a wreck. In contrast to a worrying contingency that Hume, in particular, maintains, Tindal Kareem suggests the Puritan cause-and-effect morality offers readers safer seas. In other words, Defoe deploys spiritual autobiography to reorganize impressions from a chaotic *post hoc propter hoc* world to one with rational causation, while also underscoring readers' weakness for "self-

conjured illusion” (88). She shows how the murkiness of the border between what the reader would recognize as real and what Robinson so meticulously described in Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* works to make readers feel as Robinson does: astonished at the marvels of nature in a foreign register. As the complementary reverse of this argument Tindal Kareem explains Hume’s *Treatise of Human Nature* as an example of how what appears unreal becomes real.

Winning as the argument is, it seems to me to underplay the contemporary context—for readers as well as writers—of pervasive satire and generic miscellaneousness. While the delayed decoding in *Gulliver’s Travels* ably defamiliarizes the normal, it does so for a satiric purpose that extends more radically than Tindal Kareem acknowledges in order to destabilize the reading process, the reality claims of print, and the literary marketplace. The famous episode alluded to above in Part I of the Lilliputians’ examination and classification of the contents of Gulliver’s pockets, for example, is here read as a “disruption,” (107) both irritating and entertaining to readers: such disruptions, however, thread through all eighteenth-century fictions as they teeter between an episodic, picaresque structure and Aristotelian causal narrative. Further, Tindal Kareem ingeniously suggests that, when Gulliver withdraws from humanity at the book’s end, Swift compels his readers to sway between skepticism and sympathetic wonder both at and with Gulliver, and thus negates Gulliver’s simplistic equation of humans with Yahoos. However, the possibility that Swift is commenting on contemporary philosophy and directing a specific satire at philo-neoclassicism may modify this reading.

Chapter three moves into the mid-century, a period in which Tindal Kareem considers fiction has found its feet, albeit gradually, and established itself in a conventional and uncontested realm where reality—or factuality—no longer need be claimed. Thus, in place of the defamiliarizing techniques of early accounts of encounters with the new world, Henry Fielding in

Tom Jones and Horace Walpole in *The Castle of Otranto* employ suspense to mystify and tangle the relationship between cause and effect, and so promote wonder. Tindal Kareem maintains that, while ridiculing Partridge's superstitious suspense, Fielding "relocates the marvelous and its associated categories—suspense, wonder, and surprise—within the real" (124). This is an embellishment of Jill Campbell's analysis in "Fielding's Style" (2005), which Tindal Kareem mentions, of the author's augmentation: Fielding's practice of lengthily drawing out his sentences gradually to reel in the readerly experience from confusion to learning to knowing. But it seems to me to underrate the payoff of reading Fielding: not wonder, but rather the confirmation of the reader's own knowledge of human motivation. It is what is *not* surprising that forms the delight and frames the lesson—in contrast, say, to the deliberately unbelievable description of the idealized Sophia (135). This, perhaps, is what Tindal Kareem intends when she points out astutely that, "Fielding defines the marvelous not as an aberration from the real but as the true real that lurks beneath the false veneer of the probable (137).

In the fourth chapter we return to natural science with the "hyperrealistic" descriptive prose of *Baron Munchausen's Narrative of his Marvellous Travels and Campaigns in Russia*, published in 1786. This string of stories by Rudolphe Erich Raspe, unlike the other texts "solicits credulity suspended *within* skepticism" (154), by both plot and an idiosyncratically idiomatic language that invites readerly estrangement. This strikes me, however, as rather like the effects sought by the canonical novelists, although the form of multiple short stories demands a different kind of reading from that of, say, *Tom Jones*—one more similar to the various kinds of self-consciously lying or ironic fictions of the late 1780s, for example Eliza Haywood's *A Spy upon the Conjuror* (1724). The enterprise of presenting an impossible world in the language of scientific empirical realism to produce the sensation of wonder and—again—satire, moreover, is

surely the trademark of all science fiction (into which category *Gulliver's Travels* may also fit). *A Description of A New World, called The Blazing World* (1666) by "Mad Madge," Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, for example, similarly if less scrupulously describes the polar world inhabited by Bear-men and Fish-men and so forth in the terms of contemporary natural description. Similarly, her 1653 volume of scientific verse *Poems and Fancies* includes defamiliarized descriptions of an atomic universe, including a charming verse on the atomic worlds that might dwell within an earring.

The final chapter moves into the Regency with Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, two texts fairly often paired for their metafictionality. Tindal Kareem sees both as critiquing wonder and its role in constructing the Romantic myth of the genius as naive in a period of fresh anxiety and encroaching science over the claims of fiction to truth. In both, Tindal Kareem argues, the protagonists emerge as "promoters of a false realism that conceals its artifice" (188), and suggests they critique the apparent opposition between science and romanticism. This, in turn, leads to the reader's self-reflexivity. On the surface, this seems not a particularly new point, but by connecting it to the larger argument that the novel employs defamiliarizing techniques to evoke readerly wonder, it achieves more resonance. As Tindal Kareem notes, the figures of Victor Frankenstein and Henry Tilney remain ambiguous: both admirable and unreliable.

While, like other critics, Tindal Kareem sees the novels as debunking both science and fiction by derogating Victor Frankenstein and Henry Tilney, once more her argument does not, in my view, take into sufficient account the role of conventional satire in both novels, particularly in regard to the role of imagination. Catherine Morland has drunk, like many a learned lady before her, too shallowly of the Pierian Spring: her late-learned insights into the

tyranny of patriarchal society may possibly reveal the power of imagination to find a deeper truth than appears on the empirical surface, as once argued by Claudia L. Johnson, but they may also invent it. The easy admiration Catherine exhibits, first for the tinny Isabella Thorpe, then for the Gothic, and finally for Henry himself shows her good nature and illuminates her sound emotional impulses. (And surely this contradicts what Tindal Kareem recommends as fiction's lesson for modern readers: an open-hearted and accepting attitude toward the escapism that literature provides.) But Catherine's susceptibility to admiration also remains foolish. Moreover, Henry Tilney is by no means facilely categorized as a risible pseudo-realist: he admits he loves novels, and refuses the distinction between "good" and "bad" literature. More persuasive, if perhaps less original, are Tindal Kareem's analyses of the mis-read generic clues both authors (following Ann Radcliffe's practice) trail in front of readers to prompt them, when the truth emerges, into a response parallel to Catherine's: a wonder at the horrors of the real world. In the end, unlike any of the other texts Tindal Kareem explores, these ultimately remain ambiguous. There is no absolute answer to Catherine's claim that General Tilney is a monster equivalent to Radcliffe's Montoni, or to the question of the limitations of individual genius and science in Victor Frankenstein.

Although the early "realistic" novel forms the focus of this study, other genres briefly appear. Indeed, Tindal Kareem maintains that she seeks not to discuss wonder "as a means of systematically elucidating a single genre or literary mode" (29). Yet that is, indeed, very largely what the book attempts. While she mentions John Keats' poem *Lamia* (1820), an examination of nature as wonder—a highly conventional trope since even before the formation of the Royal Society for the Improving of Natural Knowledge in 1660—one wishes that she had had time to explore more poetic treatments of the marvelous in the quotidian, especially during the proto-

romantic second half of the century. These also might suggest that the effects she examines extend messily beyond generic confines not only within but beyond the novel. Sentimental fiction, too, merits mention as playing deliberately through metafictional references and multiple narrative frames with the notion of wonders hidden from the mercenary world and perceptible only to the sensitive hero.

Tindal Kareem's argument deploys an "affect theory" (25) that she finds in eighteenth-century texts is "more archetypal than historically oriented" (24-5). Indeed, the book is above all interested in the phenomenology of reading: "wonder's slipperiness—its protean shape-shifting from affect to emotion to evanescent mood" (27), which entails both physical and intellectual response. Thus, the book stresses that eighteenth-century novels compel readers into self-awareness *as* readers, what she calls "engrossment and reflection" (24)—a consciousness of the reading self wondering at the wonders it reads. As a consequence, however, the historical details of fiction-production and reception recede. I wonder whether Tindal Kareem paradoxically simplifies the way the eighteenth-century novel works. In the splendid *The Appearance of Print in Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (2011), Christopher Flint, in the course of mapping the ways in which eighteenth-century novels refer to their own material and imaginative textuality, shows just how much authors rely on reader's complicity and collaboration to bring their books alive, and just how important individual decisions by book-makers from authors to printers and booksellers were to the "finished" product. Like J. Paul Hunter in the seminal *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of English Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (1990), Flint stresses the miscellany of narrative forms in the baggy monster of the early novel and the correspondingly miscellaneous readers it addresses: "The tendency in many eighteenth-century fictions to aggregate various generic forms, internalized stories, and essayistic subject matter reveals that

the ‘reader’ they very often address is, more evidently, a composite set of readers with enormously varying interests...” (43). In contrast, Tindal Kareem assumes a uniformity of response from readers irrespective of culture, gender, age, nationality or education; in turn, she underrates the generic smorgasbord eighteenth-century authors spread out for them.

This is an ambitious and thoughtful first book. It is steeped in theory, contemporary to the subject and to her readers, and it aims to present both a theoretical and an historical argument about the vexed status of eighteenth-century fictional “fact.” In fact, it is rather too theory-thick: the author seems to need to position herself very precisely, almost delicately, between myriads of critics and practitioners of cognitive theory, narratology, eighteenth-century studies, and more, and paragraph-long summaries and reiterations of the book’s main claims resurface with distracting frequency. As a result, it bows somewhat under the weight of the dissertation it once was. Jargon creeps in “heterocosmic” does little to make the argument clearer (117, *passim*). Nonetheless, the readings are elastic and bristle with insights, and the book hence contributes some original and provocative insights into the workings of the reader’s mind as s/he peruses the strange fictions of the century that shaped the English novel. At the same time, the book is more about the suspension of disbelief commanded by eighteenth-century prose fiction than about the cultural struggle with wonder in a period moving from old pieties into an age of secular empiricism. However, what it does serves as a telling corrective to the passive understanding of the early novel as marked, above all, by “realism,” and it returns fiction to the realm that so mesmerized eighteenth-century audiences of spectacle, prose, politics and history: wonder.

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