

BOOK REVIEW

Moglen, Helene. *The Trauma of Gender: a Feminist Theory of the English Novel*. University of California Press, 2001. x + 226.

Reviewed by Thurgasinii Muthai,
University of Malaya <thurgasinii.muthai@gmail.com>

Helene Moglen's *The Trauma of Gender: A Feminist Theory of the English Novel* challenges the conventional view that the rise of capitalism and the accession of the middle class in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were the main reasons for the development of the English novel. Rather, she attributes the emergence of this genre more to the establishment of the sex-gender system in England. Moglen also challenges the assumption that realism is the dominant feature of the early English novel, arguing that both realist and fantastic elements occur in the genre; whereas the realistic serves to outline a gendered society, the fantastic reveals internal conflict, and the convergence of these strains results in the emanation of individualism. Moglen argues that the shift in the economic structure and the failure to distinguish 'masculinity' and 'femininity' purely based on genitalia changed social perceptions of gender, thereby causing a 'trauma of gender'. This trauma is evidenced by the constant fear of not living up to gender roles, by a sense of tension between the sexes and an inability to express emotions.

In Chapter One, "Daniel Defoe and the Gendered Subject of Individualism", Moglen analyses three novels by Defoe in which the protagonists possess self-superiority alongside heightened anxiety and the need for isolation: *Robinson Crusoe*, *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana*. As Moglen shows, the characters' struggle to achieve autonomy is portrayed in a realistic form of writing, while their consciousness and inner conflicts are presented in a fantastic mode. Pressured to adapt to the developing sex-gender system, these abandon their families, isolate themselves and objectify others so that they seem superior.

The next chapter, "Clarissa and the Pornographic Imagination" analyses Richardson's *Clarissa, or the History of a Young Lady* to expose men's exploitative relationship to women. Women are categorised as either wives, whose main task is to produce an heir and nurture them in their specified gender roles, or as whores, who are socially rejected yet greatly desired. Moglen reveals that Richardson subconsciously exposes his protagonist's (and his) need to connect to the strong maternal bond once held in the infant stage, while seeking this in the most 'gender appropriate' way.

Subsequently, "(W) holes and Noses: The Indeterminacies of Tristram Shandy" presents an example of what sex-gender trauma could do to a person's psyche by building on the ideas of Julia Kristeva and Jacques Lacan. According to Moglen, Sterne's protagonist occupies a world wherein men are constantly trying to escape prescribed gender roles and exclude female characters from their lives, and this lack of female contact and a desire for sameness leads to the emergence of homosexuality.

While realistic narratives dominate the first three chapters, the final chapter focuses on the fantastic. In "Horace Walpole and the Nightmare of History", Moglen argues that Walpole uses gothic images to portray melancholia and its psychic effects in his protagonists. Although focusing on *The Castle of Otranto*, Moglen also analyses *The Mysterious Mother* to show the recurring pattern of incest and outrageous anger in Walpole's works. Moglen subsequently presents these as Walpole's means of coping with the loss of his mother in a social-acceptable way, arguing that the loss of a mother's love can lead to a frantic search for a substitute, which is nonetheless hampered by fear of transgressing prescribed gender roles.

This is an excellent work on the sex-gender system and its psychological effects. Although Moglen's research is primarily based on Freud's psychoanalytical theory, other theorists are rightly drawn upon to enrich her readings of literary texts, namely Heinz Kohut, Jessica Benjamin, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, in addition to Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva mentioned above. However, Moglen's lengthy descriptions of the authors' lives could have been made more concise. I also questioned Moglen's decision to focus on the work of four male authors. Although she justifies her decision on the grounds that the separation of male and female authors is necessary for a better

understanding of the 'trauma of gender' and that different approaches are needed to do justice to male and female experiences, respectively. I could not help but wonder if the inclusion of a female author would have provided a fresh angle to her research. That said this was an exciting read, and one that I will be returning to for future reference.