

Loveman, Kate. *Reading Fictions, 1660-1740: Deception in English Literary and Political Culture*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008. ill, 232 pp. \$99.95.

Kate Loveman's study takes as its subject the practice of reading in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, arguing that a fundamental part of readers' orientation toward texts in this period was the determination not to be fooled. This orientation, she argues, developed in the context of political debates, religious controversies, and coffee-house culture, all of which created different risks of deception and forced readers to be on their guard against them. Moreover, she says, authors' techniques of trickery and readers' means of resistance were carried over from these arenas into the genre of the novel as it began to develop. As Loveman notes in the introduction, critics have long been interested in reading as a sociable practice, in early novels' frequent use of truth-claims, and in readers' relation to novels. Her innovation, she claims, is that rather than inferring data about readers from the novels themselves, she seeks to draw on other kinds of evidence to get at actual readers and actual reading practices. As she also notes, however, evidence of reading practices is notoriously difficult to come by and to evaluate in context. The introduction briefly discusses one such kind of evidence: the "expansion in, and coalescence of, the semantic fields of wit and deception" (10). Other kinds of evidence come into play in each chapter, with varying degrees of success.

In the first chapter, Loveman sketches out the background of the set of practices she calls skeptical reading. She identifies a number of factors that helped create the perceived need to read critically in order to prevent deception: increases in literacy and in the amount of printed material available, Protestant anxiety over the dangers of "popery," a growing sense of political practice as deceptive, the development of empiricism, and sociable reading in venues such as coffee-houses. Noting that many of these factors contributed to a low status for deceivable readers, she then identifies some of the textual elements readers examined to assess a work's credibility: its medium (print or manuscript), format, title, the author (or lack thereof), the publisher, narrative voice, and genre (with Catholic legend, romances, and travels the denigrated genres). Taking the skeptical stance could offer readers social advantages by situating them at the top of a "hierarchy of readers based upon . . . perceived credulity" (45) as well as providing the pleasures of gossip. Loveman's concluding claim here sets up important implications for the rest of the study: truth-claims need to be considered not simply as calls for belief but rather as invitations to engage in critical and often playful reading.

Chapters two through four focus on examples of deception from contexts usually understood as extra-literary. Chapter two examines a little-known hoax from the 1650s, the pamphlet *A True and Exact Relation of the Strange Finding Out of Moses his Tombe*, as an example of how such hoaxes were constructed. Briefly noting that Anthony Wood and John Aubrey describe this pamphlet as a sham, Loveman goes on to reconstruct readers' putative behavior from the pamphlet's construction, noting that it appears to be aimed at a knowledgeable readership and that its satiric effect depends on the sham being found out. Chapter three uses jest books to explore the coffee-house culture of shamming, especially as they may reveal the kinds of responses called for from readers. Loveman draws on one particular jest book, William Hicks's *Coffee-House Jests*, to argue that that text's depiction of "sequences of interlinked '*probable Stories*' said to be '*told by several Persons in a Room together*'" (66)--which appears in no other jest books, she notes--represents actual coffee-house bantering practice. While the concept of exchanging stories seems plausible enough, it seems curious to make such a sweeping assertion on the basis of a single piece of uncorroborated evidence. The remainder of the chapter uses the *Isle of Pines* sham to describe the sham as a genre that signaled its nature to knowing readers, suggesting that shams "offered a way to address a varied audience . . . and a way to rank the members of that audience" (82). Loveman points out that knowing readers often pretended to be taken in by such shamming texts as a way of playing along, and she suggests that readers who appear to take early novels for truth may be engaging in the same kind of response. In Chapter four, Loveman argues that both Whigs and Tories used terms from coffee-house jesting to describe political plots and propaganda, focusing specifically on discussion of the Popish Plot. Using the notebooks of Peter Le Neve and the annotations of Narcissus Luttrell, the chapter suggests that booksellers used shamming strategies to entice readers and that readers employed the tactics of skeptical reading to sort through the conflicting political narratives.

Chapter five begins the study's turn toward more traditionally literary texts; it claims that one important reason for the novel's low reputation was its close connection with political propaganda. Noting the popularity of Aphra Behn's political novel *Love-Letters between a Noble-man and his Sister*, Loveman maintains that Behn's novelistic strategies influenced much of the writing published around the warming-pan scandal, including scandal chronicles and publications by the informer William Fuller. Based on the evidence of two readers who annotated *The Amours of Messalina* (1689) and two who annotated *The Perplex'd Prince* (1682), the chapter concludes that readers read both political texts and fiction using the same skeptical reading habits. Again, the conclusion is a

plausible one, but the evidence supporting it is rather thinner than such a broad claim would seem to require. In Chapter six, Loveman argues that Daniel Defoe's narratives are often shaped by the need to respond to readers who considered them shams. She shows that Defoe tried to cast *The Shortest-Way with the Dissenters* (1702) as a bantering hoax in the coffee-house mode but was largely unsuccessful; she then demonstrates that Charles Gildon's well-known pamphlet critique of *Robinson Crusoe* belongs to the tradition of skeptical reading and rallying. Claiming that these misreadings defeated Defoe's intention to convey a moral lesson, Loveman then argues that Defoe adopted unreliable narrators in *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* to signal their fictional status and therefore shift readers' attention away from determining the text's truth and toward its moral insight. Chapter seven reads Jonathan Swift as belonging to the coffee-house tradition, especially in the Bickerstaff predictions, *The Tale of a Tub*, and *Gulliver's Travels*, and argues that Swift used the shamming tradition both to score political and satirical points and to extenuate his political attacks. The study's final chapter situates the *Pamela* controversy in the context of coffee-house wit and skeptical reading to argue that an emerging paradigm of sympathetic reading began to challenge skeptical reading practices. Loveman points out that reading Richardson's novel in the context of this tradition means that readers' claims to believe the truth of the story cannot be taken at face value but rather need to be seen as a conventional way of praising it. By the same token, critiques of *Pamela*, like Fielding's, adopt the conventional methods of skeptical reading and witty banter, not from outrage at the novel's fictionality but because those methods were effective ways of mocking it and discrediting its moral claims.

The study's conclusion restates its major claim: that early readers shaped the development of fiction through their complex responses to deceptive texts and that novelists constructed their fictions within the larger context of shamming and witty banter. Although Loveman carefully notes the difficulty of reception study in this period, she does at times slip into making greater claims than her evidence seems to warrant--generally claims for widespread practice based only one (or very few) examples of actual readers. But her ideas are important and hold significant explanatory power for the study of the early novel. Her study offers a new window into these early texts and their historical contexts, suggesting new understandings of readers' behavior that went beyond simple ideas of deception and immorality to point to sophisticated reading practices that called for sophisticated responses from authors.

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