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Review of *Courting Disaster: Reading Between the Lines of the Regency Novel*, by Zoe McGee

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COURTING DISASTER: READING BETWEEN THE LINES OF THE REGENCY NOVEL, by Zoe McGee. Manchester University Press, 2025. 336 pp.
£20.00 hardcover; £20.00 ebook.

As I write this review for a book addressing sexual violence against women and the silencing of female voices, the Epstein case is raging around the globe. In the United Kingdom a senior government official and a former prince have been arrested, whilst across Europe further investigations into powerful men have been launched. In America, where multiple allegations are not yet actively being investigated, the atmosphere feels like a pressure cooker ready to blow. However, apart perhaps from the scale of the enterprise, the Epstein scandal tells us little we didn't already know about how many men choose to treat women and how—across years, decades and centuries—women have been abused and then silenced, ignored, and dismissed.

When speaking about my eighteenth-century-focused research to those outside the fields of literature and history, I often feel a nagging need to justify my endeavors, as though what I do does not relate to the issues that face us today. Back in my undergraduate days, I was told by an acquaintance who read maths that her subject was more important than mine (English literature) because she “studied things that were real”, and this disconnect – the idea that the humanities are just a “nice to have” optional extra – seems to have gained traction over the years. We live in a world where the value of knowledge is often measured in purely economic terms: we must evaluate the impact of our scholarship, and demonstrate that the students in

our classrooms have been able to obtain good jobs as a result of their degrees. History and literature, however, are foundational academic disciplines that go to the heart of human experience. Take away history and you take away the collective memory of a society. Take away literature, and you lose access to some of the greatest minds who have ever lived, wrestling with issues that continue to affect us today.

Courting Disaster: Reading Between the Lines of the Regency Novel by Zoe McGee is an excellent example of why such work in the humanities is needed—not just to help us analyze the past, but to understand what is happening today and to examine how we got here. McGee takes perennial issues relating to violence against women and examines them in the dual contexts of eighteenth-century novels and modern-day events, drawing strong lines of connection between the two. The conclusion? Not only are women still facing problems that would have been recognized by their eighteenth-century counterparts, but that this is happening, at least in part, because the power structures that enable those problems are still in place nearly three centuries later. Such immediacy is very much part of the book's appeal, since it can be all too easy to shrug off examples of injustice or suffering in the past by saying, "Well, that's just what it was like back then." Or, in the case of literary sources, to take a leaf out of my undergraduate acquaintance's book and write them off as "not being real." By placing literary texts and modern-day scandals side by side, McGee collapses this sort of cozy cognitive compartmentalization. This in turn allows the links between then and now, between fact and fiction, to be examined in an unflinching and direct manner.

The book is divided into four sections—entitled

“Consent,” “Innocence,” “Violence,” and “Marriage”—which are topped and tailed by an introduction and a conclusion. They are subdivided into chapters examining a range of eighteenth-century novels: Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* (Richardson is notable here as the only male author); Sarah Fielding’s *Ophelia*; Mary Hays’s *The Victim of Prejudice*; Frances Sheridan’s *Sidney Bidulph*; Frances Burney’s *Evelina*, *Camilla* and *Cecilia*; and Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*, *Mansfield Park* and *Persuasion*. These run in a roughly chronological order, although the chapter addressing *Sidney Bidulph* is situated towards the end of the book, and the Burney chapters are also out of sync. In between these anchor texts, other key novels from the period are also examined. So, for example, aspects of Jemima’s story from *Maria or, the Wrongs of Women* are brought into the analysis of coercion in the Frances Sheridan chapter. All six major Austen novels make appearances of some sort, even if their heroines are not all explicitly referenced in the chapter titles. Additionally, there are two chapters which support and expand the main themes of the book, but do not primarily address novels. These are entitled “Jane Doe” and “Anon,” and cover issues relating to the treatment of female complainants both now and in the eighteenth century. In “Anon,” this includes a discussion of eighteenth-century rape trials, drawn from records held at the Old Bailey. The result is a book which analyzes some of the most important novels of the long eighteenth century—including many which have undoubtedly been victims of Clifford Siskin’s “Great Forgetting”—set against a backdrop of reflections on twenty-first-century current affairs.

As this is a review for the *Burney Journal*, I’m going to focus on the three Burney-centric chapters: “Cecilia, or Credit

and Credibility,” “Camilla and Eugenia, or What You Don’t Know Can’t Hurt You,” and “Evelina, or the Value of Virginity.” *Cecilia* is the first to be addressed, located within the section addressing “Consent.” At first glance, the chapter does not appear to be dealing with the idea of consent in the way one might expect, given the rest of the book’s content. It begins by examining Cecilia’s debt to the bookseller, and the attitude that each of her guardians (Briggs, Harrel and Delvile) have towards her accessing money from her fortune in order to pay it off. However, after explaining the basic plot set-up for readers who might be unfamiliar with the novel, McGee links the lack of respect Cecilia’s guardians have for her choices with the theory of speech acts. In particular, she is interested in what happens when speech acts fail. This, McGee explains, occurs in one of two ways: the listener either understands the meaning of what is said but chooses to ignore it; or, the listener hears what the speaker says, understands it, but decides for some reason that it does not count.

As well as showing how Cecilia’s guardians do not “hear” her, McGee expands her analysis using Mortimer Delvile’s insistence on placing greater trust in Harrel’s assertion that Cecilia is engaged to Sir Robert Floyer, than in Cecilia’s protestations that she is not. McGee’s point is that for Mortimer, the evidential weight of a statement made by another man (Harrel) overrides that made by a woman, even when that woman is someone with whom Mortimer is in love, and who he knows is otherwise entirely truthful. Having explained the theory of speech acts within an eighteenth-century fictional context, McGee then segues into a section on Harvey Weinstein, analyzing how differences in a speaker’s believability

affect whether or not knowledge is acted upon. First, there is knowledge which might be widely shared, but never moves beyond being an unofficial “open secret.” Then, there is a second category of knowledge—which may have exactly the same factual content as the open secret—but which is widely held to be true and from which consequences flow. The problem, both for Burney’s Cecilia and for Weinstein’s victims, is that neither were the type of people who were listened to (or believed) by those that mattered (for “people who were not listened to” read “women,” and for “groups that mattered” read “powerful men”). In the case of Weinstein, colleagues within his own company and many others within the film industry were fully aware of his behaviors. However, it was only after the story broke in the mainstream media (ironically, the non-disclosure agreements obtained by his company were pivotal in this regard) that his abusive behavior was acknowledged and dealt with accordingly.

This summary provides a good example of McGee’s general methodology: a theme is identified and then expanded upon through close analysis of the eighteenth-century novel in question. It is then examined from a theoretical perspective, before being relocated to the present day, using an issue or news story that should be well-known to readers. Having said that, McGee’s chapter on *Camilla* takes a different approach, with more focus on the novel and fewer modern exemplars (although it does expand upon the theme of innocence raised by Sarah Fielding’s *Ophelia*, which immediately precedes it). Within the context of *Camilla*, McGee relates “innocence” to sexual innocence (in the case of Eugenia), and innocence of the world more generally (where Camilla is concerned). The argument she makes is that even clever, well-educated young women—and

there are few female characters in eighteenth-century novels better educated than Eugenia—need more than schoolroom accomplishments in order to avoid the dangers of the real world. These dangers might be financial and reputational (in Camilla's case, not understanding what things cost), or lead to horrifying and unspeakable violence, as with Bellamy's abduction of Eugenia. What Burney is telling us in *Camilla*, McGee thinks, is that women (like men) must be brought up to understand and manage risk—and that this cannot be done if they are shielded from unpleasantness whilst in the safety of the family home.

Finally, at the end of this same section on innocence, we find the chapter addressing *Evelina*. Here, McGee focuses on the power of social class, and how this affected the ways in which men treated women who came into their orbits. She uses her reading of the novel to demonstrate one of the unspoken social rules of the eighteenth-century: women who deserve to have their virginity preserved are those who are also likely to become the wives of the gentry. In contrast, those from lower socio-economic backgrounds do not have that protection—and, moreover, have no right to resist any man wishing to force himself upon them. Burney vividly illustrates the impact of such a system of malign entitlement: even though her heroine Evelina *is* of the social class which makes her potential wife material, the fact that she is found in the long alleys at Vauxhall Gardens is, to the men who threaten her, a more important signifier of her social value than her protestations. Her speech acts are willfully dismissed because she is assumed to be someone whose voice does not matter. McGee points out that even when her identity becomes known to Sir Clement Willoughby, he chooses not to apologize for his behavior but instead protests that it is *she* who

created the misunderstanding by being in the wrong location. McGee argues that this still resonates today, since female victims of male violence are constantly told that they are responsible for their own abuse: that they should not have dressed in a particular way, or should not have been in a certain location, or gone out alone after dark. The blame is deliberately shifted from perpetrator to victim.

The range of topics addressed within *Courting Disaster* is wide-ranging and, in places, make for a challenging read: if I was to put this book on an undergraduate reading list, I would certainly need to include a content note. The fact that many of the issues women writers in eighteenth-century texts raise remain real, frightening problems for women today is in itself deeply disturbing. Here, on the continuum which exists between the past and the present, the book is very strong indeed. However, I felt that it could have beneficially made the distinction between past and present a little sharper in some places, particularly when discussing modern understandings and sensibilities that do not sit comfortably within an eighteenth-century context. As a reader, I bring a particular level of specialist knowledge, deriving from my experience working as a lawyer in divorce, family law and domestic violence cases. Accordingly, I am hyper-aware of differences within legal processes across both different eras and different jurisdictions. Whilst I don't imagine it is McGee's intention to suggest that modern sensibilities can be neatly mapped backwards onto the eighteenth century, the act of drawing those strong lines of connection means that differences should ideally be explicitly and carefully articulated, too. Whilst it was easy for me to navigate between the two legal contexts, it might not have

been as straightforward for a less experienced reader, especially one coming to the novels (and indeed the eighteenth century) for the first time. Therefore, a little more signposting, perhaps alongside an increased amount of historical context, would have been optimal. Because of this reservation, the chapter entitled “Anon” stood out for me as one of the most powerful sections of the book, not least because it did provide this explanatory context. Here, the Old Bailey transcripts relating to rape trials are examined in detail, bringing to light the low rates of prosecution, describing the court process and providing a close reading of the language and terminology used in the cases. Again, whilst there were comparisons made with the modern day (the appallingly low rates of reporting in rape cases, and the even worse levels of convictions, for example) the full historical context allowed both distinctions and similarities to be clearly drawn.

I very much appreciated the chance to read this book. Not only did it provide a fresh slant on ground familiar to me as part of my own research, but it took me into new and compelling territory. It posed important questions about how we view eighteenth-century literature today, versus how we perhaps *should* see it: illuminating the issues female authors wished to bring to their readers’ attention over two centuries ago and linking them to themes still dominating today’s news agenda. This is important work. It is imperative that we recognize that systems of entitlement which enable abuse and exploitation remain largely intact, despite the work done to dismantle them in recent decades. It is never (to quote Henry Tilney in *Northanger Abbey*) “only a novel”—or indeed, only a woman making a complaint. Perhaps one of the greatest legacies

of the eighteenth-century realist novel is that it speaks the truth about women's experience *even when it is fiction*. We may not have equality of the sexes (yet), but we do have the voices of Fielding, Burney, Austen, and their associates—and maybe it's time we started to listen properly.

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