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Review of *The Novel Stage: Narrative Form from the Restoration to Jane Austen*, by Marcie Frank

Abstract

A review of Marcie Frank's *The Novel Stage: Narrative Form from the Restoration to Jane Austen* by Kathleen E. Urda

Keywords

Genre, media, novel, drama, realism

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Marcie Frank. *The Novel Stage: Narrative Form from the Restoration to Jane Austen*. University of Bucknell Press, 2020. 219 pp. ISBN: 978168448712.

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Marcie Frank's *The Novel Stage: Narrative Form from the Restoration to Jane Austen* sets out to recover the vital relationship between the novel and the stage during the long eighteenth century. Frank argues that her book is distinct from studies with similar objectives in its refusal to see the novel and the stage as rivals that are opposed to one another. Instead, she makes the case that "the novel and drama were allies and collaborators" (3) during this time. The book also describes the persistent "overshadowing of genre by media" (36) in literary history—such that, for example, a genre like drama has become completely identified with the medium of the stage. Frank both explains how that overshadowing occurred in the first place and how it continues to narrow critical understanding of genres. While *The Novel Stage* analyzes various plays in order to make its arguments, it is the novel, particularly its identification with print and realism, which Frank effectively re-envisioned. In so doing, she makes a substantial contribution to recent scholarship that resists realism as the inevitable end point of prose fiction and that seeks to broaden thinking about genre.

Frank persuasively elaborates her provocative thesis in "Genre, Media, and the Theory of the Novel," a dense first chapter that requires—but rewards—careful reading as it demonstrates how, during most of the eighteenth century, novels and plays were collaborators rather than competitors. She illustrates how much the medium of print remained relevant to the drama and the medium of performance remained relevant to the novel with audiences often reading published versions of plays alongside their viewings of them, attending adaptations of novels while reading them, and with both playwrights and novelists displaying an awareness that "readers were playgoers" (34) and vice versa. If a particular medium like performance cannot solely be identified with one genre or another, in Frank's estimation, critics can reassess the assumption that the novel's innovations are necessarily tied to and evolve through the medium of print only and expand the history of the novel to include forms like tragicomedy and melodrama, which have long since been dismissed because of their theatrical aspects.

Though Frank draws from performance and reader response histories, she readily admits that her main concern is with how the texts themselves bear out her thesis and advocates for scholars reading literary works with both genre and media equally in mind. Her "[t]hinking genre and media together" (38) remains, at first,

a somewhat elusive theoretical concept as she applies it in her second chapter, “The Reform of the Rake from Rochester to Inchbald,” where it can seem like a simple acknowledgement of the drama’s influence on the novel. Gradually, however, over the course of the chapter Frank expertly provides a case study of how thinking genre and media together works by showing what can be seen without the assumption, for example, that dramatic conventions can only exist in the medium of performance or that novelistic ones are confined to the medium of print. Frank presents a far more complicated continuum between the eighteenth-century stage and the novel when it comes to the rake and the representation of his reform. The chapter explores debate about this representation between plays like Colley Cibber’s *Love’s Last Shift* (1696), in which the rake Loveless suddenly reforms at the play’s end, and John Vanbrugh’s sequel *The Relapse* (1696), in which Loveless again appears but succumbs once more to temptation. Vanbrugh’s sequel clearly critiques the former’s portrayal of reform as lacking believability, however moral it might be. If there is no conclusion about how to represent the rake’s reform on stage, the same is true, Frank argues, when we move to the novel where the reform of a rake like Mr. B in Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740-41) gives rise to works like Henry Fielding’s *Shamela* (1741) and Eliza Haywood’s *Anti-Pamela* (1741) that question the efficacy of letters and reading as accomplishing or proving reform despite the immersive, slow, and thus purportedly more plausible, reform such letters enact for readers. What Frank demonstrates well here is not only the persistence of the rake across genres and media but also that neither the medium of performance nor print emerged as a definitive solution to the problem of representing a rake’s reform. Instead, at the end of the century, we see how a novelist and playwright like Elizabeth Inchbald “adapts stage techniques [like the tableau] to narrate” the reform of a rake (69) in her novel *A Simple Story* (1791) even as “she availed herself of the plot innovations that the novel supplied for the stage” (72) to portray a rake’s reform in her play *Wives as They Were, Maids as They Are* (1797). The cross-pollination Frank observes in Inchbald’s works is evidence of what thinking genre and media can reveal: principally, that both the stage and the novel drew from multiple media (e.g., print, performance, art) to communicate with an audience.

While this second chapter considers an ongoing collaboration between the stage and the novel from the vantage point of both genres, the three chapters that follow primarily turn their attention to the novel and how various features, mostly thought of in terms of print, either are informed by or work through and in multiple media. Each of these chapters is cleverly organized around an approach often cited as what only a realist novel can do—Henry Fielding’s employment of the letter, Frances Burney’s use of free indirect discourse, and Jane Austen’s practice of narration—and beautifully demonstrates these approaches’ debt to

both page and stage. Though, as Frank admits, critics have long noted Richardson's status as a dramatic novelist and the way his immersive use of letters enables a theatrical absorption for readers, in "Performing Reading in Richardson and Fielding," she insists that Fielding's "interruptive" use of letters is also theatrical. Such a reading relies not only on remembering Fielding's inclusion of letters in his plays but also on moving away from analytical tools derived from the nineteenth-century novel, like character, and replacing them with terms like attention. Fielding uses letters to cultivate a different type of attention from readers than that of absorption in a character's mind, as in *Tom Jones* (1749) when we learn of, but do not directly experience, Squire Allworthy's forgiveness of Tom and then read the letter that occasions it. Such "inset narratives," are, according to Frank, akin to Fielding directing readers offstage to consider Allworthy's internal revolution and represent a specifically theatrical, means of earning a readers' attention.

Frances Burney's practice of free indirect discourse in the novel is similarly theatrical as Frank illustrates in "The Promise of Embarrassment: Frances Burney's Theater of Shame." Burney's play *Love and Fashion* (1799) unusually uses "novelistic" asides—novelistic because they "give audiences or readers epistemic privilege by expressing thoughts or wishes that a character does not know or own" (111). Meanwhile, in novels such *The Wanderer* (1814), Burney depicts moments of embarrassment through a free indirect discourse that makes a stage of the heroine's mind, spotlighting both her feelings and her imagined picture of herself in the theater of society. The final chapter of *The Novel Stage*, "Melodrama in Inchbald and Austen" brilliantly explores the similarities between Elizabeth Inchbald's and William Godwin's recognizably melodramatic novels and Jane Austen's works, more commonly thought of as exemplars of "psychological realism" (144). Frank anatomizes how Austen "turns readers into spectators" both through her narrator's "asides and gestures" (144) and through scenes like Wentworth eavesdropping on Anne's conversation at a climactic moment in *Persuasion* (1818), where Austen heightens emotion with stage effects like Wentworth dropping his pen as he listens. Melodrama and its tools are essential even to this most realist novelist, and, as Frank briefly argues in her coda, to nineteenth-century novelists as well.

Occasionally, *The Novel Stage* overstates the originality of some of its revelations. Is it really the case, for instance, that other critics "have not identified the fixed depiction of the rake as an aristocrat in novels as a debt to the stage" (99), given the frequent acknowledgment of Richardson's Lovelace as a figure from the Restoration stage and as the forebear of novelistic rakes from Willoughby to Rochester? Nevertheless, most of Frank's readings are startlingly

original in their portrayal of the novel's dramatic workings and deliver on the book's promise of a paradigm shift in the definition of the novel genre. Frank assures readers that by arguing for the "dialectical relationship between collaborations across the categories of genres and media," she offers a more "unified history of the novel." (156). I remain uncertain. I take nothing away from the persuasiveness of her argument by asking if it is so comprehensive in what it considers novelistic (or dramatic) that it renders genre basically meaningless as a concept? Despite generic interpenetration, the experience of attending a play (even the adaptation of a novel) and of reading a novel (even aloud) still seem distinct. Perhaps the most fascinating question of all is why, given the collaborations among genres and media that Frank so convincingly presents, this distinctiveness endures.