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*Defending Privilege: Rights, Status, and Legal Peril in the British Novel*, by Nicole Mansfield Wright. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020. 224pp. \$34.95. ISBN 978-1421433745.

Conceptions of the eighteenth-century British novel as primarily in tune with free-market, individualistic tendencies which are also somewhat proto-democratic (in Capitalistic fashion), have been challenged in criticism from the 1990s. Especially since then, readings of eighteenth and nineteenth century fiction have problematised that older, essentially Whiggish reading of a 'progressivist' novel. The structures of power and identity-perception therein in newer critical narratives have brought us a much more nuanced account of the history of the novel. Nicole Mansfield Wright's *Defending Privilege: Rights, Status, and Legal Peril in the British Novel* nicely invites us to think in a concentrated way about the novel as plaintive (and sometimes plaintiff) conservative vehicle from the 1760s to the 1820s.

Essentially a series of absorbing critical case-studies, the book is divided into two loose (but helpful sign-posting sections). In the first of these 'Downward Mobility and the Safety Net of the Law' some welcome attention is paid to Tobias Smollett's *The Life and Adventure's of Sir Launcelot Greaves* (serialised 1760-61). Its central character the seemingly picaresque Greaves is read as an 'elite traveller', an outsider within the contemporary chaos and flux of society who needs protection also from institutions such as the law which have been degraded by the loosening of the old hierarchical structures of Britain. With admirable fairness, Mansfield Wright identifies this conservative but not completely reactionary terrain of Smollett's as helpfully drawing to attention 'the ideology of rights and due process' and also opening up discussions about 'oppression'. There is also some thematic crosscutting in a fascinating discussion of Smollett's *Ferdinand Count Fathom* (1753) in its internationalist outlook and (up to a point) its reversal of anti-Semitic cultural stereotypes; of value also is a very precise hooking into the literary critical discussion consideration of Smollett's own real-life battles in the legal courts. The second treatment within part one of Mansfield Wright's book deals with the fictions of Charlotte Smith in the 1790s. Smith is bracingly read as 'the first English female author to adopt a thriving Continental tradition of legal discourse for laypeople'. Smith was enabled here by her work as a translator of French legal cases as well as her own notorious family difficulties as a separated wife attempting to make a living amid complicated family and family-business circumstances. In the first instance the 'genteel victim' par excellence, and self-portrayed as such, her novels such as *Emmeline* (1788) provided consideration of the technicalities of the law, food for thought and of potential practical usage for both the bourgeois and the masses. Through fictional reflection on such details, however, *Emmeline* is not merely some kind of 'self-help' book but essays social and legal disempowerment (most especially for women). As with Smollett, Smith's writing, logically enough, is from a class (bourgeois as opposed to the former's

preferential option for the aristocracy) whose power was being challenged as the eighteenth-century progressed. Both, writing complaint from privileged position were, nonetheless, asking clear questions, of universal social relevance. In the case of Smith, Mansfield Wright's reading reveals the novelist as perhaps more of a proto-Feminist than is sometimes thought.

The second section of the book, 'The Pen as a Weapon against Reform of the Law' turns to Walter Scott's *Redgauntlet* (1824), a novel about the intrigues within a (fictional) third Jacobite rebellion, smugglers and mob rioting. Mansfield Wright produces a sophisticated reading of the novel's 'marginalized grievance' and 'privileged fear', and sets these themes in the context of Scott's use of epistolary mode as crucial means of mediating voice. 'Scott's protagonists [are] professionally trained in the law, and they face a balancing act between, on the one hand, representing the lowly and, on the other, distancing themselves to assert their own authority.' *Redgauntlet* is a work portraying professionalism (the law) as cornerstone of paternalistic society. Morally sincere, according to his own lights, Scott could not have foreseen what he might almost have been warning of: a populist future of 'televised court-sessions and sensationalistic news articles in which short-lived public attention to a marginalized person's quotidian legal struggle is construed as something of a substitute for justice.' In her final treatment, the author looks at the proslavery novel, *Hamel, the Obeah Man* (1827) by the mysterious, probably pseudonymous, Cynric R. Williams and the anonymous, *Marly; or, A Planter's Life in Jamaica* (1828). Mansfield Wright makes the good and obvious point that 'the literary output of British proslavery writers remains curiously underexamined' That curiosity is probably answered by the fact that the views of such individuals are evermore taboo. To her credit, the author follows her own critical curiosity, although unlike the other chapters she preambles a little too long before reaching the primary matter in this one. The contextual history of the law that she usefully assembles might have been more readily integrated into the discussion of the two novels in which she is interested. *Hamel* recounts a failed slave rebellion and portrays the blacks in their self-discipline (sometimes intentionally perhaps, sometimes not so intentionally) as exemplary to their white overlords. Suppressing their liberties (including their legal testimony in situations of conflict), the whites find that the autonomous potential they observe is replete. Cautioning against this as its author does in the emotive and dramatic form of the novel, Mansfield Wright opines (rightly, surely), 'William's choice of the novel is a flagrantly wrong mode for the proslavery message.' *Marly* impressed contemporary reviewers, with its authenticity of detail and purpose from the point of view, supposedly, of a real-life planter. Mansfield Wright draws attention to the contradictions and inconsistencies, including the fact that the author-narrator alternates between conveying callous detachment and thoughtfulness on the plight of the slaves. However, this precisely draws attention to the legal voice and status in general of slaves in the early nineteenth century. Ironic undercutting can be a quality most difficult tangibly to pinpoint and one might almost believe that *Marly* is actually a sardonic, sophisticated abolitionist work

from the reading provided here. In any case, the disinterment of the ostensibly proslavery voice in *Defending Privilege* presents an interesting potential opportunity for further scholarship in an age when we tend to be too squeamish about points of view and subject-matter which are ostensibly rebarbative.

A short coda to this book meditates on the contemporary political scene and how present-day rhetoric around representation and the law might not be any more sophisticated than the (often quite sophisticated) narratives of the novel of two hundred and more years ago. It ends with the intriguing and very current thought that reading of these novels among other things might aid 'recognition [of] the common ground between conservative and humanitarian values [and] could help facilitate the drawing together of disparate interests into a coalition to oppose the specter of authoritarianism'. The case for 'useful reading' made by the author is sensible and even pedagogically useful, as it wisely forbears from cruder types of presentism. One small slip as she traverses this modern terrain is the author's reference to 'David' when it should be William Rees-Mogg as co-author of *The Sovereign Individual*.

This is a monograph written with commendable clarity, wearing its substantial learning lightly. Ranging across the novel form, legal history, gender, race and class, it will be of interest to any scholar of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century novel.

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