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Author

Horejsi, Nicole

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Retelling NEOCLASSICISM

by Nicole Horejsi



IN THE FALL OF 2000, I entered UCLA as a medievalist, eager to explore English and continental romance. But it wasn't long before my course of study changed, thanks to Felicity Nussbaum's seminar on a prominent network of

eighteenth-century women writers, the Bluestockings, which quickly won me to a later period. During that first quarter of graduate study, I discovered the work of Clara Reeve, whose *Progress of Romance* (1785) foregrounded, in a much more dramatic and exciting way, some of the same issues that had initially attracted me to medieval literature, such as the relationship between romance and women, as well as inclusive "feminine" romance and exclusive "masculine" epic, and the role of romance as a national literature.

My work on Reeve went on to become a cornerstone of my dissertation, "Retelling Neoclassicism: The Limits of the Classical Tradition in the Eighteenth Century," in which I argue that, throughout the century, authors revisited and revised the classical tradition in order to invent competing histories and mythologies, especially for women and the variety of others that tradition excluded. In recent years, many critics have explored the ways in which neoclassicism promoted the status quo, shoring up British values at a time of unrest and uncertainty. Some others have argued that eighteenth-century investment in the classics was not uncritical: a number of "Augustan" writers, including Swift and Pope, queried both the classical past and the British present. Whereas these authors tended to favor modes that arguably upheld "neoclassical" values, such as the mock-heroic and

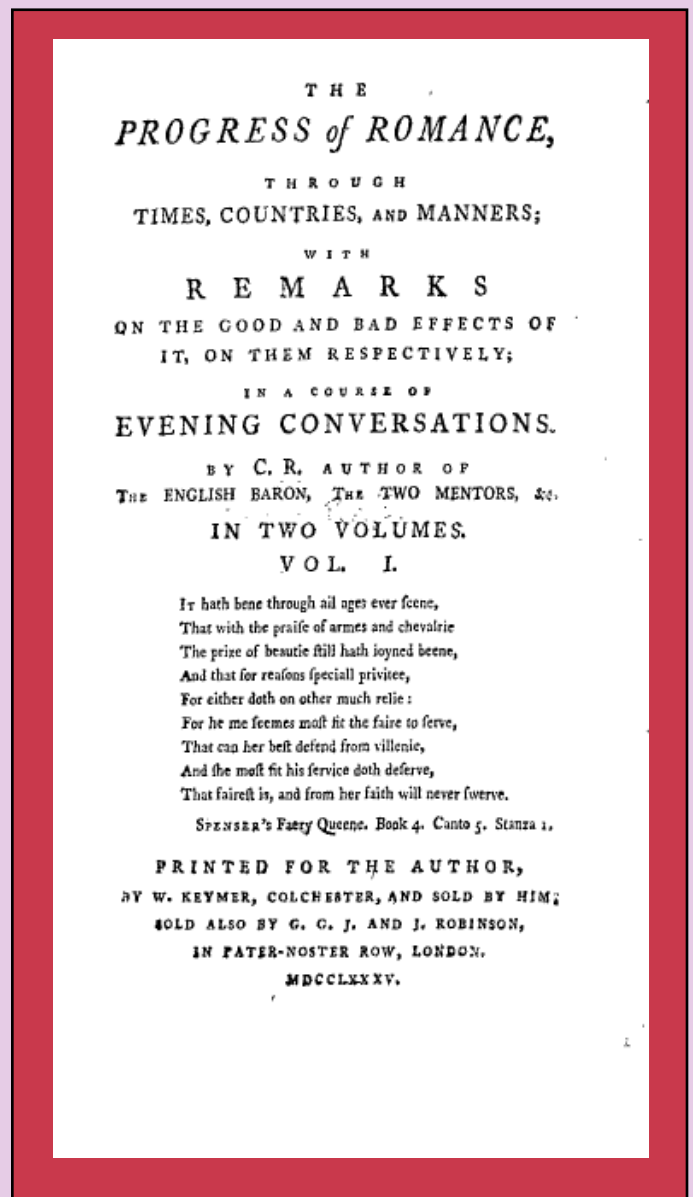
burlesque, my dissertation considers the ways in which others radically contested prevailing generic distinctions, and the ideologies, often inherited from antiquity, associated with them; where satire and mock-epic were overtly critical, this complicated engagement with the past was subtle and deeply ambivalent. As eighteenth-century authors, particularly women and moralists such as Richard Steele, Charlotte Lennox, Henry and Sarah Fielding, and Clara Reeve, explored the limits of the classical tradition, they rewrote their heritage for the sake of a more general and diverse readership. I conclude that "neoclassicism" served, for these writers, as a set of tools for questioning generic boundaries and hierarchies, thus revealing the fallacy of cultural binaries—self/other, masculine/feminine, "East"/"West," fact/fiction—as authors sought alternative narratives, anchored in, but distinct from the classics, including the oriental tale and romance.

As I intuited during that seminar on the Bluestockings, this generic blending and transformation reaches its fullest extent in Reeve at the end of the century. Appending *The History of Charoba, Queen of Ægypt* to her literary-critical dialogue, *The Progress of Romance*, as a model of the romance tradition she champions against classical, masculine epic, Reeve depends on allusion to incorporate and rewrite epic within romance. In doing so, she aims to elevate a more inclusive genre, one which, as she has already argued in the *Progress*, has the potential to become a national literature capable of correcting epic's violent legacy. In doing so, she allusively recalls examples of wronged classical women, such as Cleopatra, in order to foreground the power of narrative control: Charoba, who commemorates her own history, represents a positive counterpoint to traditional history and epic, which writes "woman" and "other" for its own masculine ends. Anticipating Reeve's contribution at the end of the

continued

century, I begin chapter 1 by arguing for the importance of generic innovation in response to the classics in the works of Richard Steele. In Spectator 11, for example, Arietta presents the story of Inkle's New World courtship and betrayal of Yarico to rival Petronius' anecdote of the Ephesian Matron. Interweaving epic, satire, fable, and history, she rewrites the Matron's misogynist story in the geography of the New World in order to emphasize men's treachery, creating an opposing tradition in defense of women and colonial Others. Like Steele's heroine in Spectator 11, who invents, in the story of Inkle and Yarico, an unorthodox narrative still linked to England's classical heritage, Lennox's heroine, Arabella, attempts to lend authority to her romance vision of the world by seeking rival precedents in the "Eastern" tradition. Chapter 3 engages this romance legacy in order to consider an unanswered question: Why do the most frequently cited romances in Lennox's novel, *The Female Quixote* (1752), take place in the classical "East" and feature heroines besieged by international conflict, frequently at the crossroads of imperial domination? Lennox's interest in the romance illustrates an important trend among writers critical of (neo)classical culture: many take advantage of a renewed fascination with the "New World" and the "East"—both historical and imaginative—to turn away from England (and Rome) in their work.

In a text roughly contemporary with Lennox's, Henry Fielding also blends romance and epic with novelistic conventions even as he turns away, in his final novel, from the mock-epic and burlesque elements of earlier works, to revise classical epic in the much-maligned *Amelia* (1751). As Fielding transforms Vergil's Aeneas into the figure of Amelia Booth, Chapter 4 builds on feminist discussions of Fielding's work to explore this unprecedented shift in the gendered subject of national heroism. Like Lennox and Steele, Fielding questions the typical values associated with epic in favor of a more inclusive genre and, by challenging failed masculine models, looks forward to Clara Reeve: Amelia emerges as a feminine ideal to counter the Roman Aeneas. Chapter 5 argues that, in *The Lives of Cleopatra and Octavia* (1756), Henry's sister, Sarah, remains equally critical of classical epic and history. Blending romance, novel, (auto)biography, oriental tale, and ancient history, Fielding subtly rewrites and critiques the script of



Augustan propaganda. Although for S. Fielding, as for Lennox and Reeve, the discourses of fiction and history remain closely intertwined, so that romance bleeds seamlessly into sanctioned fact, the *Lives* express the difficulty of confronting authorized masculine fictions that rewrite the transgressive and virtuous woman alike: where Reeve's Charoba appears victorious because she records her own story for posterity, Cleopatra and Octavia often seem delusional because the known "facts" of Roman "history" already contradict them.

Nicole Horejsi received her Ph.D. in June 2006 and is currently a lecturer in the UCLA Department of English. Her dissertation, entitled "Retelling Neoclassicism: The Limits of Classical Tradition in the Eighteenth Century," received the 2006 CSW George Eliot Dissertation Award.