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Institutions of the English Novel's Canon: Review of Institutions of the English Novel by Homer Obed Brown

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Institutions of the English Novel's Canon

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Homer Obed Brown. *Institutions of the English Novel: From Defoe to Scott*
Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press 1997. 228. US \$39.95

In *Institutions of the English Novel*, Homer Obed Brown throws his hat into the increasingly crowded ring of scholars vying to explain the origins of the English novel. Eschewing the most popular method of late – identifying a discourse that has influenced the novel – *Institutions of the English Novel* makes the case for a re-evaluation of the eighteenth-century novel on the basis of its definition. Brown asserts that scholars should understand the development of the novel as a project of hindsight, as the work of nineteenth- and twentieth-century critics. According to this conception of the novel's origins, the eighteenth-century narratives later grouped as novels were in fact 'diverse, inchoate, singular acts of institution that could only much later be seen and instituted collectively as a more or less integral genre.' The novel did not 'rise' or 'originate' or 'develop,' but was 'instituted' by a nineteenth-century nationalist critical movement primarily featuring Sir Walter Scott. According to the 'general thesis,' 'what we now call "the novel" didn't appear visibly as a recognized single "genre" until the early nineteenth century, when the essentially heterogeneous fictional prose narratives of the preceding century were grouped together institutionally under that name.' In this view, the novel is a nineteenth-century concept imposed on eighteenth-century texts, not an eighteenth-century invention at all.

Brown makes his case essentially by examining traditionally canonical novels to identify characteristics that came to define what it is to be a novel. These are exemplary tales of individual aspects of the novel, each the specialty of a different author, which were used to canonize those authors' texts and to define the genre, that is, to create the 'institution' that was labelled 'the novel.' In 'The Errant Letter and the Whispering Gallery,' for example, Brown uses *Clarissa* and *Pamela* to demonstrate that the genre relies on gossip and letters, and how that reliance signifies an awareness of audience and perhaps of transgression. The 'displaced or purloined letter and gossip, as well as the relationship between them, are more than ubiquitous plot devices in novels,' Brown explains; 'this is one way that novels emblemize their own nature as fictional texts.' Self-consciousness about context and history in the fashioning of narrative characterizes the novel according to 'Tom

Jones: The "Bastard" of History, and 'The Displaced Self in the Novels of Daniel Defoe' suggests ways in which the novel explores the impossibility of defining a self through textual representation. Brown also examines Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, whose narrative and formal quest for origins expresses and resolves the genre's same quest, and Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* novels (*Waverley*, *Rob Roy*, and *Redgauntlet*). In his last single-author chapter, 'Sir Walter Scott and the Institution of History,' Brown argues that Scott's novels and criticism are the point at which 'the English novel' becomes institutionalized, in part by integrating the novelistic characteristics identified in previous chapters, such as the awareness of the novel's fictionality through the use of correspondence and gossip, a rewriting of history to explore the nature of fiction and current political events, and so on.

These chapters are fascinating readings of these texts, in no small part because they are meticulously attentive to language. That deep concern with the words themselves is certainly one of the most elegant and enjoyable aspects of *Institutions of the English Novel*. The fourth chapter, on *Tristram Shandy*, displays particularly intricate manoeuvring in thematically and formally connecting Trim's discovered sermon with the Epistle to the Hebrews to suggest that their use of conventions demonstrates how works use convention to identify themselves as genres. Not that a strictly formalist approach would serve Brown's thesis, however, and he does not attempt one. There are many places in his analysis where he turns to context, especially to history, as in his discussions of *Tom Jones* and the *Waverley* novels. This awareness of the connection between form and context leads to a concluding chapter on ways in which canons are made and changed, an investigation demonstrating an acute awareness of the extratextual forces that contribute to the definition of a genre and the resulting canonization of different texts as excellent examples of that definition. The discussion of the anthologizing movement at the beginning of the nineteenth century connects to recent considerations of anthologies as evidence of deliberate attempts to make or shape culture. 'None of this can be reduced to the trivia of antiquarian bibliomania, as it might have been a few years ago,' Brown rightly notes. He ends with a reminder, through his example of Daniel Defoe, that just as literary tastes have changed in the past, so they will change again, and with them, definitions and values of genres, including the novel and its canon.

Given his thesis that the nineteenth century 'made' the novel, it is surprising that the ideas and method of the last chapter do not feature more prominently in *Institutions of the English Novel*. If Brown's primary assertion really is that 'these earlier narratives are designated novels by a more modern cultural and literary institution as precursors in its own retrospective legitimating institutional history,' it would have been useful to see the nineteenth-century method for canonizing these works in more than a few pages at the end. Specifically, by leaving unexamined the mechanism of canonization, Brown's work reinscribes the traditional – which appears to be Sir Walter Scott's – canon of Defoe, Fielding, Richardson, and so on. In light of the considerable and growing body of work which reveals the role of women in the creation of a genre as well as its market, and their influence on and from male authors of the time, including Defoe, Fielding, and Richardson, such a

reinscription is problematic. For Brown, for example, Scott's 1809–10 edition of Defoe's works expresses a 'preference for male adventure romances and historical fiction' that might be identified more accurately as a preference for male-authored adventure romances, since Penelope Aubin also wrote works merging romance and adventure and often involving male protagonists which were not anthologized or collected. In exploring Crusoe and Defoe's 'disappearing acts' from *Robinson Crusoe*, Brown seems to identify a rhetorical manipulation consistent with the 'vanishing acts' that Catherine Gallagher identifies in *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Act of Women Writers in the Marketplace, 1660–1800*, which, she points out, are performances illustrated best but not exclusively by women authors. Nevertheless, Brown's discussion does not acknowledge this similarity, even to distinguish itself from it.

I am not arguing that Brown should include women solely for the sake of discussing women – critical tokenism, as it were – or for the sake of pleasing this particular (female) reader. These oversights oversimplify his focus by restricting it. Brown's definition of 'romance,' a term that runs throughout his work, is a case in point. Although, early on, Brown quite correctly acknowledges the vagueness as well as the interchangeability of 'novel' and 'romance' during the eighteenth century, the word seems to take on meaning inconsistent with the evidence of eighteenth-century authors. For Brown, 'romance' means 'medieval romance,' the chivalric Arthurian narratives that were employed during the eighteenth century by writers such as Thomas Warton and George Ellis. In contrast, authors of the period used 'romance' for a broader set of narratives and conventions. Clara Reeve's definition in *The Progress of Romance* encompasses a wide vision of the development of the genre which might have proved useful to Brown's overall claims about the looseness of certain literary definitions and genres. Certainly other critics have argued that the tremendous commercial success of works balancing between novel and romance created a body of work that allowed fictional prose narratives to survive to the early nineteenth century. These works also contributed to the creation of texts that allowed nineteenth-century critics to define the novel, either through inclusion or exclusion.

Brown claims that he does not address the question of why certain authors were canonized and not others because any answer would 'necessarily implicate' certain 'accidents and contingencies' that are explained by their connection to the genre, and that the novel appropriates so thoroughly that it 'does not leave untouched any "outside" sufficient to *define* genre, let alone instituting of genre, literary canons, or practices (institutions) of reading.' In short, 'I cannot say *why* this particular text was chosen (or its own apparent self-nomination confirmed) for the canon of the novel, nor how and why fictional narratives form or were institutionally selected to form the genre of the novel in particular ways and at different times, nor finally by what institutions at those different times that institutions were instituted' (original italics). Nevertheless, at the end of his final chapter, Brown suggests that a constant shifting of the border between the mainstream and the marginal characterizes the institutionalizing effort: 'if the novel must constantly renew its search for novelty, its very novelness, in what is by definition outside or beyond it, in its other, so

would literature, driven by a similar cultural logic, have to follow in that pursuit.' This second formulation indicates that the novel and literature must have an 'outside,' even if that boundary always shifts. If so, how and where that boundary is placed must be essential to constituting and comprehending the genre, but Brown allows this idea only at the very end of his work. This placement allows *Institutions* to sidestep the question of why these values, why these definitions, and with it, questions of why its own values and definitions – that is, why George Ellis instead of Charlotte Lennox on the subject of romance, why Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* rather than Aphra Behn's *Love-Letters between a Nobleman and His Sister*, which was based both on letters and gossip and predates *Pamela* by fifty years.

In light of Brown's sensitivity to shifts in generic fashion and his concern with the use of literature as a culturally defining and defined force rather than an essential entity unto itself, some of the flaws in this study are almost more ironic than disappointing. Methodologically, *Institutions of the English Novel* is very interesting, connecting the incisive attention of close reading with the broad view of cultural studies, especially in the way it ties to the growing number of studies examining the way reading creates genre and vice versa. As such, it seems one possible union of the oft-separated formal and contextual methods used on eighteenth-century fiction. But what ultimately disappoints about *Institutions of the English Novel* is not what it does accomplish, but that it accomplishes incompletely what it sets out to do. It might be a lesson about the problems of separating male- and female-authored texts, but it is also a reassuring indicator of the possibilities, even in this much-discussed field, of the narratives of the English novel still to be told.