Powell on Counter (2016)


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In *The Amorous Restoration: Love, Sex, and Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century France* Counter reprises his demonstrated excellence in research and writing. A springboard for intriguing notions regarding the political and sexual intersections of Restoration culture and their expression in narratives of the period, the book is a joy to read: exceptional and often humorous, drawing on an eclectic array of sources, including *libelles*, pamphlets, journalistic articles, medical treatises, memoires, and correspondences alongside a refreshing look at the standard literary corpus of the period plus several less common titles. *The Amorous Restoration* is a must read.

Divided into an introduction, six chapters, and a coda, the book examines political anxieties of the Bourbon Restoration as they are represented through love and marriage narratives. In the introduction and first chapter Counter demonstrates that “in talking about sex, Restoration writers were often talking about politics [but] also talking about sex” (14). As he recalls “the Restoration’s tortured aesthetics of avoidance” (20), Counter invites us to appreciate that “the language of love is in truth a paradoxical metalanguage that constantly insists on the inexpressibility of its object” (21). Through a quick look at semantic slippage of terms like “Platonic love,” “friendship,” and “amour moral,” Counter insists there is no “absence of the erotic […]; if anything, [the denial of sexual possibilities in literature is] a variation on an erotic theme” (26). The abiding narrative tension in Restoration fiction, Counter continues with reference to Margaret Waller, is expressed in part through the “symbolic feminization of amorous values” (28), what he terms the “impediment structure” (38). The apparent movement from marriage as contract to marriage as love and passion is “symptomatic of an important political impulse in Restoration letters, a social reformist vision that took ‘better’ marriages as the privileged fictional metonym of a future, ‘better’ society” (40).

Using Claire de Duras’s *Olivier* and Constant’s *Adolphe*, alongside the marquis de Custine’s biography, as springboards for the often complex facets of his argument, Counter explores the *mariage de raison* model. In conjunction with Charles Fourier’s theories and condemnation of intimate relationships, Counter notes that these “novels of impediment” demonstrate the cultural climate of the time, “a metonymic crisis in which the institution of marriage stood for the organization of society in general” (51). He maintains that Latouche’s and Stendhal’s versions were not merely exercises in misogyny (152) and that the political content consists not just of attacks on Custine, but statements on the conservative Catholic culture under Charles X (Diethelm and Lucey). A similarity of style and vocabulary in these narratives—a certain attraction to secrets, impediments, obstacles, and tension between individual desire and social duty together with the collision between individual freedom and collective welfare—take the reader to Rousseau’s *Social Contract*; but while Counter makes cogent comments on the Savoy vicar’s political treatise, sadly he ignores the French notion of universalism.

In his discussion of “radical romanticism” (Mario Praz), Counter identifies notions of “a sadistic erotic streak, [indeed a sense of] proper [er] masoch[ism]”: incest, enforced chastity, a “channeling of erotic energy away from sex, through a series of ecstatic yet painful deferrals” (67), as well as subtle allusions to same-sex activity. He provides however a tantalizing caveat: “the transgressions here are celebrated not because they are really transgressions but because they are really normal” (68; italics in original). The standard argument of anti-bourgeois criticism (Leo Bersani) affords astute observations related to a self-loathing tendency in Restoration culture.

Scrutinizing narratives of “the bourgeois cult of the child” and the “ability of the figure of the child to represent ‘the Future’” (78), Counter studies the intersection of reproduction and politics. Drawing on Robert Nye’s observations related to the rise of a sexual-political ideal of manly virtue, he suggests that “the image of the virtuous, sexually continent man might be borrowed and deployed in the service of monarchism and aristocracy—though, of course, not necessarily effectively” (79). “[R]eproductive futurism” (Lee Edelman), or what Michelle Perrot calls “offensive familialiste” (98), can thus be seen as a master-ideology of modern Western civilization, with the queer character as the negation of the social project as conceived within the seemingly all-encompassing pale of futurity. This observation helps to explain the erosion of the past and the theme of illegitimacy, the “old ways” of the moribund society, temporarily reinforced by Catholic dogmas, but eventually doomed to disappear. The bourgeois fear of bastardy, and of everything that was not aristocratic, not ultra, not rooted in the past, reflects a religious, political, and ideological movement that promoted the marital family as the seat of morality, led by traditionalist and unambiguously aristocratic thinkers such as the vicomte de Bonald (98).
The enjoyable last two chapters deal with “a cultural and moral disagreement about the meaning of the word ‘scandal’ as a pathogenic spectacle that spreads corruption, but which was in the early nineteenth century beginning to acquire a ‘progressive’ definition as a therapeutic revelation that brings that corruption to an end” (175). Monsters, celibacy, the influence of the Catholic Church, secrecy and the confessional, historical variability within the historicity of sexual morality, and the discourse on ancient attitudes toward incest deliver substantial material for a quite satisfying menu of first-rate textual analyses and cultural commentary. Police records and journalistic accounts, as well as a stage play and pamphlets about the Mingrat case—in which a parish priest strangled and sexually assaulted a young woman—provide Counter with evidence to “explore how this particular sex crime was ‘put into discourse’” (175). Counter meticulously demonstrates how morally bound cultural discourse created a climate that Michel Foucault would later study in *Surveiller et Punir*. The “danger of representation of vice, and the demoralizing effects of those representations upon an impressionable populace, is what early nineteenth-century moralists understood by the word *scandale*” (197).

In an astute and detailed comparison, Counter suggests that Nodier’s *De l’amour* (1831) posits the theory that July 1830 marked the end of an era, the last gasp not only of a political order but of an entire religious, aesthetic, and amorous worldview, while Fourier’s *Traité* (1822) could be considered a germinal queer theory. The latter focused on the shifting semantics of *liberté*: no longer freedom from oppression but now “the right to reveal one’s grievances publicly, and to know of the private sins of others” (203). Counter’s analysis demonstrates that Fourier goes further by stating that rules governing sexual conduct are temporary variable, incidental.

Andrew Counter’s rigorous methodology extends to cultural and political history as well as to literary criticism to construct a felicitous critical tool of substantial value. *The Amorous Restoration: Love, Sex, and Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century France* is an indispensable resource for all nineteenth-century French scholars and for many cultural historians of early nineteenth-century France.

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