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Dorothy Kelly, *Reconstructing Woman: From Fiction to Reality in the Nineteenth-Century French Novel*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007. 184 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. \$25.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-0-271-03267-2.

Review by Hannah Thompson, Royal Holloway, University of London.

Dorothy Kelly's clearly written and carefully argued work of literary criticism focuses on the impact that various scientific trends prevalent in France in the second half of the nineteenth century had on the French novel's understanding of how the body, in particular the female body, is created and manipulated. Kelly's focus on Balzac, Flaubert, Zola and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam enables her to discuss, in considerable detail, some of the canonical novels of the time alongside lesser known articles and short stories. Her readings, which frequently involve close and fruitful attention to textual detail, demonstrate how the novelists' creations were informed by their wider social, geographical and especially scientific contexts. Science and literature were two related aspects of cultural production in the nineteenth century and Kelly shows how all the novelists, as well as many of their male protagonists, share a fantasy of replacing an actual, natural woman with an artificial, man-made one, inspired by scientific developments ranging from mesmerism to *puériculture*.

This fantasy, which Kelly characterises as a "male usurpation of the reproductive power of woman" (p. 3) is repeatedly interrogated by Kelly's self-avowed feminist readings which ask how and why male authors seek to undermine the role of the natural woman. Kelly's feminist theoretical focus is nuanced by her appropriation of Bourdieu's theory of social—principally gender—construction, in particular his theory of 'habitus' and his use of the idea of the performative function of language. Kelly's use of Bourdieu enables her persuasively to show how all her authors see language as a means of creating or changing the real. Kelly thus discusses the texts thematically but also, crucially, she repeatedly focuses on their self-reflexivity, that is, what they tell us about their author's understanding of his own creative processes.

After a lucid description of her project, Kelly's introduction details the century's principle scientific fashions and their impact on the literary scene. By providing brief discussions of the issues surrounding dissection, evolution, transformism and heredity, Kelly shows how nineteenth-century fiction and thought was beset with anxiety over man's origin and his similarities to and differences from both animals and machines. This anxiety in turn raised questions about the relationship between the natural and the artificial and between the organic and the mechanical which are at the centre of all the texts discussed. Kelly shows how all four novelists use the imagery of surgery and medicine, specifically metaphors of dissection, to demonstrate their understanding of the natural woman before attempting to create an artificial woman. Kelly also traces the development, as the century progresses, from scientific observation (manifested in the works of Balzac and Flaubert) to scientific experimentation (manifested in the works of Flaubert and Zola) and the impact which these changes had on the novelists' fantasies of control and transformation. By aligning themselves with surgeons, doctors and anatomists, the novelists suggested that their writings provided a means of both dissecting and curing the ills of the nineteenth century which were, for them, frequently manifested in the figure of the natural woman.

Kelly's analysis of the novels of Balzac focuses primarily on *La peau de chagrin* with subsequent illuminating examples from *Le Colonel Chabert*, *Le père Goriot*, "Un Chef d'oeuvre inconnu," and *Sarrasine* amongst others. Kelly identifies a focus throughout Balzac's fiction on writers and artists who rework the myth of Pygmalion by transforming a flawed real woman into a perfect artificial one. After a discussion of Balzac's belief in man's fundamental similarity to animals and the role of social construction in determining identity, Kelly identifies that the two primary instruments used in the control of identity in Balzac's texts are language and will. In a fascinating section on mesmerism, Kelly demonstrates how Balzac's texts are populated by a group of mesmerists who control the identities of their almost always female victims. By relating the art of mesmerism to that of the novelist, Kelly shows how Balzac reveals the power of language, particularly within society, to define, indeed control man's identity. This power accorded to language goes some way to explaining the importance of the poet/doctor in the Balzacian text.

Kelly's reading of Flaubert draws on examples from *Madame Bovary*, *L'Education sentimentale*, *Salammô* and "Un Coeur simple" as well as, interestingly and effectively, on some lesser known earlier works. Kelly suggests that Flaubert's repeated evocations of mechanical sexual behaviour shows that he sees human beings, particularly the figure of the monkey-like mother, as products of animalistic, physical processes. This suggestion gives rise to an anxiety over individual worth which lies at the heart of Flaubert's fiction: is the individual unique or can he be replaced? Kelly persuasively shows how this question is foregrounded throughout *L'Education sentimentale*'s obsession with mechanical substitution. By dramatising the abandonment of the real mother in favour of an artificial version of her in *L'Education sentimentale*, Flaubert enacts a process of male creation which asserts the power of the writer to escape from the confines of his animalistic nature through art, whilst also revealing the transformative power of language.

Taking Naomi Schor's inspirational work on Zola as her starting point, Kelly's discussion of Zola focuses on the imagery of the womb as evoked throughout the *Rougon-Macquart* novels and beyond, asking what the real and metaphoric wombs which feature so prominently in Zola's fiction tell us about man's nature, his relationship to animals and machines and how human identity is constructed. Kelly's close readings make a series of fascinating links between the depiction of pregnant women in the *Rougon-Macquart* and the metaphoric wombs she identifies in Zola's descriptions of buildings such as apartment blocks, shops, markets and mines which Zola uses to characterise Second Empire France. These Zolian wombs are, according to Kelly, dangerous and destructive forces which Zola links with both the terrifying sexually voracious women who populate the series and the hereditary deficiencies and deformities which mothers throughout the *Rougon-Macquart* are responsible for inflicting on their offspring. Kelly's analysis suggests that the male heroes of Zola's texts (particularly Claude from *L'Oeuvre* and Pascal from *Le Docteur Pascal*, himself an image of Zola) attempt to eliminate natural reproduction and instead create women and offspring through their artistic or scientific endeavours.

Unlike the other novels discussed by Kelly, which use imagery, themes and structures to evoke the fantasy of an ideal woman, Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's novel *L'Ève future* is the story of the literal construction of an artificial, ideal woman. Kelly's analysis of Edison's construction of the cyborg Hadaly shows how Villiers's text foregrounds a process of artificial creation by the male whilst also undermining this male control via the enigmatic female figure of Sowana. Above all, this text, like those by the other authors discussed, testifies to the power of language as a creative force which can be used to model reality.

Kelly's insightful, rich and intelligent book identifies a shared concern over the nature of human identity which manifests itself in all the works she investigates. By virtue of careful close reading which helps her to make links between a range of disparate texts, coupled with a sound grasp of the scientific theories of the day, Kelly identifies ways in which the authors

attempt to resolve the problem of the natural woman and shows, above all, how humans, like writers, believe they can shape the existence of those around them.

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