

## Book Reviews: Unmapped Literary Territories

*A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England.* By Jed Esty. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. 304 pp. \$55.00 cloth; \$19.95 paper.

*Step-daughters of England: British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary.* By Jane Garrity. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003. 376 pp. \$74.95 cloth; \$27.95 paper.

Although critical writing on the interwar period by such scholars as Phyllis Lassner, Elizabeth Maslen, and Janet Montefiore has reminded readers of the great number of British anti-fascist novelists who protested Nazi aggression and imperialism, there have been no equivalent examinations either of the response of British writers to the imperialistic and racist policies of their own country or of how deeply these national politics were entrenched in the identities of authors otherwise critical of violent expansionism. Two recent titles by Jed Esty and Jane Garrity challenge the absence of discussion of race and empire in critical studies of British literature between the world wars and offer significant new arguments concerning the intersection of national culture and modernist literary form.

Esty's *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* challenges the notion that English literature somehow waned after the end of the high modernist period, and asserts that observable shifts away from cosmopolitan experimentalism and towards insularity were reflective of writers' experiences of a declining empire and of a shared interest in redefining Englishness. By examining the increased usage and adaptation of traditional literary forms, Esty demonstrates that local anthropology and a rural focus evolved after the earlier international and metropolitan concerns of Woolf and other modernists—an aesthetic turn that reflected the “shrinking” boundaries of the British empire. Major novelists and poets of the period (Woolf, Eliot, Forster) are analyzed, but Esty also illustrates the widespread influence of empire on culture by discussing the theories of economist J. M. Keynes, novels by postwar migrant writers including

Doris Lessing, and the arguments of early cultural studies critics of the 1950s (Raymond Williams, E. P. Thompson). Detailed close readings are extended with the application of postcolonial theory to texts not previously subjected to such analysis; *The Shrinking Island* thus contributes a crucial new approach to critical understanding of modernism and interwar imperial culture.

One of the book's more fascinating chapters is an effective historical reading of the pageant plays that were produced in the late modernist period. Esty looks back to the popularity of this traditional form in the Edwardian period, then examines Woolf's *Between the Acts* alongside neglected plays by Eliot, Forster, J. C. Powys and Charles Williams. He demonstrates how such retrograde forms "[express] two desires of the late modernist tradition: (1) the desire to mount a more participatory model of art production (as against the aesthetic virtuosity of high modernism), and (2) the desire to connect more directly with a public of art consumers (as against the cloistered alienation of high modernism)" (84). The pageant play is also represented as a decidedly English form, and demonstrative of late modernist shared interest in exploring national identity. Esty also reads the later works of canonical modernists alongside the contemporaneous novels of the "Oxford Christians," Lewis and Tolkien, a comparison which also seeks to prove both the relative conservatism and the interest in national anthropology and mythology that informed the work of the late modernist and late imperialist periods. By reviving neglected texts and forgotten writers, such as the novelist Charles Williams, Esty successfully illustrates how the tendencies which he proposes were located throughout modernist literary culture and were not limited to the productions of the Bloomsbury coterie. His argument that the insular, anthropological nationalism present in late modernist writing is bound up with the end of empire is, ultimately, a convincing one.

Although Esty's concerns illustrate the changing definitions of Englishness that were emerging at the end of the interwar period, his book does not consider how the category of Englishness itself is inflected by other categories of identity, including gender. It is possible, therefore, to regard Garrity's new book as a criticism of what is absent from Esty's politics; she even criticizes the "English literary tradition of 'men of letters' whose gender is allegedly undetectable" (302). In *Step-daughters of England: British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary*, Garrity focuses specifically upon four female modernists—Mary Butts, Dorothy Richardson, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Virginia Woolf—and argues that "the category of *Englishness* is inflected by gender" (5). She also produces new postcolonial and materialist readings of texts for which racial implications have previously not been considered; her criticisms of Woolf's maternal nationalism in *The Waves* seem particularly indispensable to an informed

reading of that novel's political influences. Garrity's text stresses that a link existed in the modernist period between maternal femininity and racism; women were depicted as protectors of the race and also as exemplary moral figures within a startlingly widespread eugenic philosophy that regarded white English nationals as saviours of colonized Others.

In *Step-daughters*, Garrity relies upon lesser known novels, secondary material by her four authors, and archival information to inform her arguments regarding the simultaneously critical and privileged positions that those writers held as citizens of imperial England. Garrity also situates canonical and neglected texts within the larger cultural domain of the interwar period: eugenics, film, fashion magazine culture, ethnography, and nostalgic ruralism inform her readings of the multiple influences on modernist women's ideals of beauty, femininity, maternity and Englishness. She expands, for example, previous analyses of Richardson's *Pilgrimage* with detailed comparisons to the racially concerned ethics of the novelist's film reviews for the journal *Close Up*, concluding that Richardson's fiction masterpiece was inflected by the same notions of exclusive and moral nationalism present in the journal's discussions of pedagogical film. Garrity also illustrates how Jane Harrison's anthropological writings on archetypes, maternity, race, the "primitive" and civilization were just as influential within Woolf's thinking as were the theories of Freud and Havelock Ellis. Garrity's study contributes awareness of links between the later nationalism of women modernists (such as Butts) and the rise of fascism, locating latent eugenicist and anti-Semitic strains throughout the work that she here identifies as advancing a pro-maternal and pro-national version of late-imperial Englishness. In their lengthy close readings, Garrity's chapters sometimes feel bogged down and can stray from their main theoretical thrust, but in general her text's materialist feminist version of late modernity is supported with useful detail that contributes an innovative view of interwar period sexual and imperial culture.

In both of these texts, empire is still largely regarded as the outside by which Englishness and whiteness were measured in the late modernist period; this is certainly the position demonstrated by Esty's and Garrity's choice of texts and authors in that both scholars look exclusively to the work of white English writers in the years between the wars. Garrity does locate many instances of racist language, such as examples of whiteness mentioned in beauty magazines, but neither text is interested in examining works produced in the modernist or late-modernist era by colonized people of color. One also wonders how the intersection of whiteness and imperial identity might be complicated with a consideration of national Irish literature. That Garrity's and Esty's texts encourage such questions is indicative of the amount of scholarship still necessary in this area, and suggestive of the necessity of their texts' original projects to the field of

interwar studies.

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