

Sophistication: A Literary and Cultural History. By Faye Hammill. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010. 232 pp. \$39.95 cloth.

Recent studies of the middlebrow attest to the modernist/middlebrow distinction as arbitrary and largely grounded in the social determination of critics' definitions of taste, and the need to assert upper-middle-class standards. Against this background, Faye Hammill's fascinatingly revealing and immensely enjoyable book *Sophistication: A Literary and Cultural History* places modernist texts alongside middlebrow texts with a conscious disregard for the split. She describes the aim of her study when she avers,

I am not seeking to construct a 'canon of sophistication'; rather, I hope to show how a preoccupation with—or a performance of—sophistication connects unexpected groups of texts together and can form the basis of a reading practice which transcends categories of genre, nation and language, and crosses boundaries between high and low, literary and commercial, serious and frivolous. (22)

The book's literary reach is therefore very broad, ranging historically from Ann Radcliffe in 1791 to a discussion of producing Noël Coward's *Private Lives* in 1995, nationally across American, English, and even Italian, French, and Anglo-Russian texts, and through books both canonical and popular. Through close readings of these texts, Hammill convincingly argues the salience of her subject as its meaning shifts through the course of European and American modernity.

Tracing the etymology of the term "sophistication" from the eighteenth century to the 1950s, Hammill shows the evolution of the word's valence. As Hammill says in her Introduction, sophistication was "Disparaged and distrusted in 1791, [but] by 1930, something to aspire to" (1). The term was associated with "'falsification', 'specious fallacy', 'disingenuous alteration or perversion', [and] 'adulteration'" (1), in its early usage. In early fiction from the eighteenth century, however, Hammill finds that sophistication's antonyms—such as "unsophistication," which was a term of commendation then—appeared more frequently even if applying the term to someone else negatively indicated the speaker's own sophistication. The slipperiness of these antonyms was only one aspect of the complexity of the term's usage, however, since the antonyms indicated both what sophistica-

tion defined itself against and how it was disseminated. Pointing to the many twentieth-century magazines and novels which purport to enlighten the reader on how to achieve sophistication Hammill comments, the “tension is legible in many texts which propose that sophistication is the property of a distinguished elite, and yet covertly offer an education in sophistication: smart magazines furnish prime examples, as do certain kinds of lifestyle guidebooks” (3). Class distinction and taste underpin sophistication’s mobilization, just as they underpin distinctions between modernism and the middlebrow, and Hammill indicates:

sophistication, I propose, was certainly originated by the upper class, and has always been associated with breeding, elitism, and a disdain for the market economy. Certainly, more recently evolved forms of middle-class sophistication can be closely involved with the commercial, yet they almost invariably retain a nostalgia for aristocratic styles. (19)

Hence, as Hammill quotes Robert Scholes, “the aesthetic and the social are wonderfully mixed” in this discourse, the markers of which are in constant flux (18).

In addition, many narratives play with their positioning of the reader, as Hammill notes, “as much more knowing than the innocent protagonist [and so] while dramatizing that protagonist’s education, [they] also present lessons in manners and models of successful and unsuccessful social behavior” (3). A consideration of sophistication elucidates disparate publications. Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* evokes childhood as a Victorian site for exploration of the discourse of innocence and knowingness. Later *Daisy Miller*, Daisy Ashford’s *The Young Visitors*, and Nabokov’s *Lolita* would all oppose childhood innocence to a threatening sexual knowledge, while in Max Beerbohm’s *Zuleika Dobson*, the dandy’s relationship to the aristocracy becomes a site where sophistication signals the descent into corruption. As Hammill points out,

As the power of the aristocracy diminished, its function as an arbiter of taste was assumed by various other groups, including dandies, aesthetes, homosexuals and others who embraced, rather than avoiding, the label ‘sophisticate’. The idea of ‘natural’ aristocracy—that is of an elite quality which is legible on the body, through clothing, and audible in manners and conversation—gradually assumed ascendance over the traditional idea of nobility as encoded in the blood. (210)

The dichotomy in both the narratives of childish innocence and the dandy’s

challenge to aristocratic manners—between types of innocence and types of knowledge—persists in the twentieth-century texts under discussion, with the added complexity that the latter period was preoccupied with sexual expression as, potentially, sophistication.

In discussing the modern era, Hammill focuses on Noël Coward's *Private Lives*, Edith Wharton's *The Age of Innocence*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Beautiful and the Damned*, Stella Gibbons's *Cold Comfort Farm*, and Winifred Watson's *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day*. While this is a wide-ranging sample of modern texts, it nevertheless leaves a gap in the discussion of sexuality as part of the discourse of sophistication and its ramifications in twentieth-century discourse that could have been filled by attention to other texts. E. M. Delafield's *The Way Things Are*, for example, and Rose Macauley's *Crewe Train* describe a preoccupation with sexuality in middlebrow writers, who tended to associate sexual sophistication with bohemians under sexology's influence. These middlebrow novels by women portray provincial characters who, like Miss Pettigrew, find themselves in sophisticated London but reject the version of sophistication that they identify with the city: urban sexual experimentation and openly discussed sexual tolerance. Gibbons's depiction of Mr. Mybug in *Cold Comfort Farm* is perhaps more typical of the middlebrow novel's "common-sense" recoil from the "shocking" sexual behavior of urban bohemians than Miss Pettigrew's embrace of it. Even while she supplies Elfine with contraceptives "sensible" Flora Poste disdains Mybug's preoccupation with sexuality and his tendency to dismiss her reaction as arising out of her repressions. She writes him off as corrupt; corruption of course is an extreme of sophistication, and perhaps points to an interesting split in varieties of sophistication in certain twentieth-century texts. Although no one would describe Gibbons's heroine Flora as "unsophisticated," the version of sophistication she rejects is that which many other middlebrow texts also reject. An examination of D. H. Lawrence's portrayal of sexuality in terms of sophistication and innocence would elucidate this question even further, since his model of the unrepressed sexual being is the lower middle-class and otherwise "rustic" gamekeeper Mellors: anything but a "sophisticate" and socially inferior to Lady Chatterley. Lawrence of course advocates a return to a form of sexual innocence that evades the repressive influences of society, but he therefore complicates the discourse about sexual sophistication and innocence marking a kind of social innocence as the necessary root of sexual rebirth.

So the book's limitation lies simply in the impossibility that it explores in depth an aspect of modernity largely unexplored elsewhere, which in turn arises from the immense significance of the subject of sophistication. Hammill herself comments on this difficulty, when she writes in her Introduction, "An enormous range of literary and cultural material might potentially have been included in this study. My final choice is inevitably

idiosyncratic” (18). The book nevertheless affords many delights in offering excellent readings of texts like *Mansfield Park* and *Evelina*, while also providing readings of the roles played by magazines like *The New Yorker* and *Vanity Fair* which “provide a middle space” between highbrow *avant-garde* culture and mass-circulation popular culture even while mocking highbrow pretension. If her study leaves out texts which might benefit from attention this is only due to the pertinence of her subject, and undoubtedly her book will prompt many further studies.

Hammill’s book is an admirable and highly illuminating study of a locus of class discourse: the production of taste, its connections with class, and their influences on literary production and behavior. It draws our attention to the centrality of sophistication to many kinds of discourse, in particular fiction since the eighteenth century. Her choice to make this a little book has many merits, not least of which is its suggestiveness for further studies. Yet she incorporates an immense variety of literature across a wide range of contexts, demonstrating that the concept of sophistication deserves our attention.

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