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The Directions of Indirection

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Annabel Patterson. *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England.* Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1984. Pp. ix + 283.

In this important and original book, Annabel Patterson explores the impact of censorship on literature in England from the mid-sixteenth century to the late seventeenth. Emphasizing connections between literature and its sociopolitical context, Patterson shows how "the historical condition of an era of censorship united writers and readers in a common interest as to how interpretation in fact worked" (p. 7). Because of the ever-present possibility of censorship by political authorities, there developed in this period "a system of communication," understood by both writers and readers, in which writers "gradually developed codes of communication, partly to protect themselves from hostile and hence dangerous readings of their work, partly in order to be able to say what they had to publicly without directly provoking or confronting the authorities" (p. 11). This system of communication was, she suggests, a "fully deliberate and conscious arrangement" between "authors and authorities" (p. 17), and it involved indirect or oblique discourse, "functional ambiguity" (p. 18), and various "smaller strategies and conventions" that constitute what Patterson calls "the hermeneutics of censorship" (p. 9). In this book, the didactic role of literature, long a critical commonplace about this period, is given a complex and decidedly political significance.

Patterson covers a remarkable range of material. The first chapter focuses on Sidney's *Arcadia* as "disguised discourse" (p. 25) and as a text that illuminates especially well problems of conscious (and changing) authorial intention and reception. Chapter 2, the most wide-ranging, examines Jonson's *Sejanus*, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, Jacobean

Opposition drama, Philip Massinger's plays, Donne's prose, the case of William Prynne's trial after his publication of *Histriomastix* (1633), Carew's masque *Coelum Britannicum*, and Milton's *Areopagitca* in order to show the "highly sophisticated system of oblique communication, of unwritten rules whereby writers could communicate with readers or audiences (among whom were the very same authorities who were responsible for state censorship) without producing a direct confrontation" (p. 45). The fruitful juxtapositions here, the numerous fascinating insights about these many texts, the surprise of Patterson's "reading" an event (Prynne's trial and punishment) in the context of "literary" texts, the boldness of placing Shakespeare and Milton among their contemporaries rather than treating them each in isolation as "giants" whose works are not of an age but for all time—all these things reveal the wonderful strengths of this book. But the very ability to cover so much material in the space of less than eighty pages also suggests what some readers may find a limitation in Patterson's book—that many works are treated quite briefly. One often wishes for fuller readings.

Having examined "strategies of indirection" (p. 45) in the relatively public modes of the drama, sermon, and political pamphlet, Patterson moves on to the supposedly more introspective mode of lyric poetry in the third chapter on "Lyric and Society." Arguing against those (especially, poststructuralist and deconstructionist) critics who, under the legacy of Romanticism, identify the lyric with introspection and self-expression and devalue or ignore lyric poetry that is topical or has a public function, Patterson insists on the close connections between lyric poems and "sociopolitical motives and pressures" (p. 125) in seventeenth-century England. She offers a fascinating reading of Jonson's *Under-wood* as a retrospective of his career in which Jonson's arrangement of the poems is, in effect, a "lyric act" (p. 139). Jonson requires the reader to recall the original occasions of the various poems and to see the new relationships formed among the poems by their textual juxtaposition and by the fact that many of Jonson's occasional poems had acquired new "conditions of meaning . . . because of what history ha[d] subsequently wrought upon their subjects" (p. 127). With its "premise that the classical lyric tradition . . . actually prompted analysis of the self's relation to society" (p. 144), this third chapter pairs Jonson with the later Cowley, whose innovative, experimental *Pindarique Odes*, characterized by equivocation and functional ambiguity, are seen as peculiarly suited to their historical context of Engagement politics during Cromwell's Protectorate. This chapter is full of insights about relations between poetry and politics in these two, quite different poets. I miss here, however, a discussion of Cavalier poetry which,

published in the period between Jonson and Crowley in the midst of radical political conflict and shifts of power, responds to different sociopolitical pressures—a subject that has hardly been exhausted by the existing critical studies of Cavalier poetry to which Patterson refers (p. 19).

The final two chapters extend Patterson's discussion to, respectively, romance and the familiar letter. Discussing Renaissance romance theory, Charles I and the "Caroline romance," Milton's changing attitudes towards romance, Barclay's *Argenis*, the French historical romans a clef, and the new, historical "royal romances" *Panthalia* and *The Princess Cloria*, Patterson reveals numerous and intricate connections between romance literature and political "realities," showing, for example, how "the royal romance" was closely associated with the court of Charles I. Moreover, she argues that, far from being frivolous entertainment, romance during the seventeenth century came to be redefined as "a way of perceiving history and even a means of influencing it" (p. 160). Chapter 5 on the familiar letter focuses on the "*documentary* status of the letter" (p. 203), the mixture of private and public in that seemingly most private of forms, as she discusses the letters of Jame Howell, Marvell, Rochester and Savile. In the "Introduction" and "Afterwords" that frame the book, Patterson extends her ambitious scope even further, bringing in *The Mirroure for Magistrates*, Dryden, and the French writers Clement Marot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

For all her interest in the indirection and protective ambiguity of this literature, Patterson herself is refreshingly direct in declaring her own assumptions and views. Rejecting the notion of the autonomous work of art, the privileging of the "universal" and timeless aspect of literature, and the emphasis in recent critical theory on the radical indeterminacy of language and texts, Patterson eloquently argues for the necessity of seeing literary texts as firmly (though complexly) connected with the sociopolitical conditions of their production, publication, and reception. And she offers a different kind of "indeterminacy" that is consciously created by writers working under the constraints of censorship. For Patterson, literature (and criticism) is not (and should not be?) free from historical/political concerns. Attacking the post-Romantic tendency to devalue literature that is "political," she emphasizes throughout how so much of the richness and literary complexity of these "early modern" texts derive from the fact that their authors were so very much concerned with the "real" world. Her interest in the way writers encoded their political opinions leads her to a concern with authorial intention, which she admirably defends as a legitimate area of critical inquiry, in spite of the attack on intentionality by both the "new historicism" and the earlier "new criticism." If literature is intimately

connected with life, so, for Patterson, should literary criticism be. Hence one of the objectives of her own study is to "break down the barriers between academic discourse and 'real' issues" (p. 3).

A number of fascinating conclusions and suggestions emerge from Patterson's study. She shows convincingly how important it is for us to discover and understand the exact conditions and circumstances of a text's publication (and, sometimes, republication) and reception. She suggests that a work's "meaning" actually changes in different historical contexts (see, e.g., her excellent discussions of Sidney's *Arcadia*, Jonson's *Sejanus* and the poems in *Under-wood*, and Barclay's *Argenis*). Despite Patterson's obvious approval of freedom of speech and dislike of repressive censorship, she implies that censorship during the early modern period had some positive consequences (for literature if not for individuals), for it stimulated writers to develop new rhetorical strategies, and fostered innovation in traditional genres (the lyric) as well as the creation of new genres (the historical romance and James Howell's epistolary history). Indeed, "it is to censorship that we in part owe our very concept of 'literature,' as a kind of discourse with rules of its own" (p. 4).

This rich and provocative book offers an approach that goes well beyond the specific texts Patterson discusses. It persuades us to look at sixteenth- and seventeenth-century literature in a new way.

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