



Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel

By Nancy Armstrong

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Desire and Domestic Fiction argues that far from being removed from historical events, novels by writers from Richardson to Woolf were themselves agents of the rise of the middle class. Drawing on texts that range from 18th-century female conduct books and contract theory to modern psychoanalytic case histories and theories of reading, Armstrong shows that the emergence of a particular form of female subjectivity capable of reigning over the household paved the way for the establishment of institutions which today are accepted centers of political power. Neither passive subjects nor embattled rebels, the middle-class women who were authors and subjects of the major tradition of British fiction were among the forgers of a new form of power that worked in, and through, their writing to replace prevailing notions of "identity" with a gender-determined subjectivity. Examining the works of such novelists as Samuel Richardson, Jane Austen, and the Brontës, she reveals the ways in which these authors rewrite the domestic practices and sexual relations of the past to create the historical context through which modern institutional power would seem not only natural but also humane, and therefore to be desired.

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Editorial Review

From Library Journal

Armstrong argues for a causal relationship between the appearance of domestic fiction and the rise of the middle class in 18th- and 19th-century England. As the female-dominated home became the respite from harsh economic realities, powerful middle-class values eventually obliterated those of the aristocracy and the working class. By this time women were achieving power because of, not in spite of, their gender. Rereading Richardson, Fielding, Austen, the Brontes, Eliot, Dickens, and Shelley, among others, and drawing on Marx, Freud, economics, semiotics, and popular culture, Armstrong offers a complicated scholarly feminist view of literary history just when you thought this burgeoning academic industry was running out of steam. For academic libraries. Rhoda Yerburgh, Adult Degree Program, Vermont Coll., Montpelier

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Review

"A very interesting look at the relationship between our political system and the novel--it should prove to be a springboard for class discussion."--Robert W. Langran, *Villanova University*

"The provocative thesis Armstrong develops challenges traditional descriptions of the rise of the novel by locating the essential force of the 18th century's new fiction in the domestic novel depicting the household as a center of female power....A genuine contribution to the growing shelf of feminist criticism."--*Choice*

"A work of considerable intelligence and insight."--*South Atlantic Review*

"This is the first book-length study to bring the insights of Michel Foucault to bear upon the subject of women and literature, and the resulting innovations are important and salutary....Her book provides a challenging revision of the history of the novel. Moreover, it entirely reassesses the roles played by both novels and women in the making of modern culture."--*Victorian Studies*

"A bold and original book....It is nothing less than a radical reinterpretation of the rise of the novel in England which simultaneously overturns...not only the established view issuing from Ian Watt, but also recently entrenched feminist readings.... It is a work with a powerful thesis and will have to be reckoned with by anyone concerned with feminism, the theory of fiction, or the rise to hegemony of the English middle class."--Allon White, *University of Sussex*

About the Author

Nancy Armstrong is at University of Minnesota.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Joni Harris:

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