

BRITISH LITERATURE

1780–1830

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LITERARY CRITICISM



CLARA REEVE

(1729–1807)

Educated by her father, the Reverend William Reeve, at home in Ipswich, Suffolk, Clara Reeve published her first volume of poems in 1769. After writing a play and an oratorio that were not produced, she turned to the novel, and in 1777 anonymously published *The Champion of Virtue*. Retitled *The Old English Baron* and reissued under her own name the following year, this novel became a great success. Here Reeve attempts to show what she later described in *The Progress of Romance*: the transformation of the conventions of the medieval and Gothic romance into the contemporary didactic novel. To write a successful novel, she asserted in the preface to this work, "there is required a sufficient degree of the marvelous, to excite the attention; enough of the manners of real life, to give an air of probability to the work; and enough of the pathetic, to engage the heart in its behalf." *The Old English Baron* traces the fortunes of the Lovel family, from initial glory through ruin at the hands of a villain, to retribution and the triumph of virtue, amidst ruined castles and ghostly visitations. Her three later novels—*The Two Mentors* (1783), *The Exiles* (1788), and *The School for Widows* (1791)—promoted sensibility, the social virtues, and egalitarian marriages.

from *The Progress of Romance*,

through Times, Countries, and Manners, with
Remarks on the Good and Bad Effects of It, on Them
Respectively, in a Course of Evening Conversations
(1785)

—from EVENING I—

EUPHRASIA: —No writings are more different than the ancient *Romance* and modern *Novel*, yet they are frequently confounded together, and mistaken for each other. There are likewise great distinctions to be made between the *old Greek Romances*,¹ those of the middle ages, and those of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Books of all these kinds have been enthusiastically read and admired; of late years they have been as absurdly censured and condemned. If read indiscriminately they are at best unprofitable,

¹ Greek romances: classical tales of love dating from the first century BC, the major writers in this genre of prose fiction were Achilles Tatius, Chariton, Heliodorus, Longus (author of *Daphnis and Chloe*), and Xenophon of Ephesus.

frequently productive of absurdities in manners and sentiments, sometimes hurtful to good morals; and yet from this Genus there may be selected books that are truly respectable, works of genius, taste, and utility, capable of improving the morals and manners of mankind. . . .

. . . I propose to trace Romance to its Origin, to follow its progress through the different periods to its declension, to shew how the modern Novel sprung up out of its ruins, to examine and compare the merits of both, and to remark upon the effects of them.

—from EVENING II—

EUPHRASIA: The Origin of Romance is of much higher date, as I hope to convince you,—but first let us speak of the name.

HORTENSIVS: How then would you define it?

EUPHRASIA: By fixing a clear and certain meaning to it, not as of my own invention or judgment; but borrowing the idea of the Latinists, I would call it simply an *Heroic fable*.—a fabulous Story of such actions as are commonly ascribed to heroes, or men of

extraordinary courage and abilities.—Or if you would allow of it, I would say an Epic in prose. . . .

. . . Romances or Heroic fables are of very ancient, and I might say universal Origin. We find traces of them in all times, and in all countries: they have always been the favourite entertainment of the most savage, as well as the most civilized people. In the earliest accounts of all nations, we find they had traditional stories of their most eminent persons, that is of their *Heroes*, to which they listened in raptures, and found themselves excited to perform great actions, by hearing them recited,—they had their war-songs—and they had also their prose narratives. . . .

Homer is universally acknowledged as the Prince of Epic poetry. . . . [W]ith all this eclat that surrounds him, *Homer* was the parent of Romance, where ever his works have been known, they have been imitated by the Poets and Romance writers.—I look upon *Virgil* as the most successful of his Imitators. . . .

—from EVENING IV—

EUPHRASIA: I hope by this time *Hortensius* is convinced, that Romances, have been written, both in prose and verse; and further that a Romance, is nothing but an Epic in prose. . . .

In early times, in the dawning of literature, these subjects exercised the pens of the ingenious—they were the favourite studies of the young nobility and gentry of those times, and their manners were, in a great measure formed upon the models of those adventures, whose exploits they continually heard recited. The effects they produced were indeed of so mixed a nature, that it is difficult to separate the good from the bad. Religion and virtue, were so blended with fanaticism and absurdity, that the lustre of the former principles, concealed the blemishes of the latter.—At this distance of time we need not be afraid to give our judgment of them, neither ought we to be ashamed to do justice to works of Genius, by whatever name they are called.

HORTENSIVS: Certainly.—I shall pay them due respect for your sake.

EUPHRASIA: Not so, *Hortensius*, I will not accept such respect for them.—You shall pay it for the sake of those illustrious men, who imbibed their enthusiasm, and carried it into practice.

These were the books that caused such a spirit of Chivalry in the youth of much later times, particu-

larly in Spain; such as raised up a *Cervantes* to attack them; and you will find a curious list of them, in the sixth chapter of the first book of *Don Quixote*, in the conversation between the Priest and the Barber; in which the Author condemns most of them to the flames.

HORTENSIVS: Is it possible to respect that incomparable work, and yet respect the books it condemns and ridicules?

EUPHRASIA: Yes it is; though it may seem at first view a paradox.—This infatuation was so general, that the brightest geniuses, and the wisest men were not exempt from it.—Our Poetry owes more to it, than you imagine; it was calculated to elevate and warm a poetic imagination, of this I shall bring proofs. *Chaucer*, and all our old writers, abound with it,—*Spencer* owes perhaps his immortality to it, it is the Gothic imagery, that gives the principal graces to his work, and without them we should soon grow tired of his Allegories,—but we have a yet stronger instance in our divine *Milton*, whose mind was so deeply impressed by them, and his imagination so warmed, that he frequently recurs to them, of which I shall only give you a few specimens.—

Fairer than feigned of old, or fabled since
Of Fairy damsels met in forest wide
By knights of Logres, or of Lyones,
Lancelot, or *Pelleas*, or *Pellenore*. PAR. REG. b. 2.

[II.358–61]

And again in the following book.—

When *Agrican* with all his northern powers
Besieged *Albracca*, as *Romances* tell,
The city of *Galliphone*;—from thence to win
The fairest of her sex *Angelica*
His daughter; sought by many prowrest knights,
Both *Paynim*, and the peers of *Charlemagne*.

[III.338–43]

There are continual allusions of this kind, sprinkled through all his works; but these may serve as proofs of what I have advanced. . . .

—from EVENING V—

EUPHRASIA: We are now to proceed to the modern Romances, which have been so often mistaken for the old ones.—after these had been exploded in a great measure, the taste for them was revived in France,

by *Calprenède*,—*D'Urfé*,—the *Scudéry's*,² and many others; who wrote new Romances upon a different plan: which in some kinds of refinement were superior to the old ones, but in the greater merits fell very short of them. They were written with more regularity, and brought nearer to probability; but on the other hand by taking for their foundation some obscure parts of true history, and building fictitious stories upon them, truth and fiction were so blended together, that a common reader could not distinguish them, young people especially imbibed such absurd ideas of historical facts and persons, as were very difficult to be rectified. . . .

The ancient and modern Romance, had each their peculiar *ton*, their *affectation*, their *absurdities*:—at the same time it must be confessed by those who despise them, that the enthusiasm they inspired was that of virtue and honour.

SOPHRONIA: That is indisputable.—I have read many of these you are now speaking of, and I can bear my testimony that they inculcated no principles contrary to any of the moral or social virtues.

EUPHRASIA: You say true.—If it taught young women to deport themselves too much like Queens and Princesses, it taught them at the same time that virtue only could give lustre to every rank and degree.—It taught the young men to look upon themselves as the champions and protectors of the weaker sex,—to treat the object of their passion with the utmost respect,—to avoid all improper familiarities, and, in short, to expect from her the reward of their virtues.

—from EVENING VII—

HORTENSIVS: We have now, I presume, done with the Romances, and are expecting your investigation of Novels. . . .

EUPHRASIA: The Romance is an heroic fable, which treats of fabulous persons and things.—The Novel

is a picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it is written. The Romance in lofty and elevated language, describes what never happened nor is likely to happen.—The Novel gives a familiar relation of such things, as pass every day before our eyes, such as may happen to our friend, or to ourselves; and the perfection of it, is to represent every scene, in so easy and natural a manner, and to make them appear so probable, as to deceive us into a persuasion (at least while we are reading) that all is real, until we are affected by the joys or distresses, of the persons in the story, as if they were our own. . . .

—from EVENING XI—

EUPHRASIA: Let us then take a brief survey of *Eastern Tales*, a class of no small extent. I have spoken largely of the *Arabian Nights Entertainment* as a work of Originality and Authenticity, and let me add of amusement. The great demand for this book, raised a swarm of imitations, most of which are of the French manufactory, as the *Persian Tales*—*Turkish Tales*—*Tartarian Tales*—*Chinese Tales*—*Peruvian Tales*—*Mogul Tales*—etc.

The stories of this kind are all wild and extravagant to the highest degree; they are indeed so far out of the bounds of Nature and probability, that it is difficult to judge of them by rules drawn from these sources.—It cannot be denied that some of them are amusing, and catch hold of the reader's attention.

SOPHRONIA: They do more than catch the attention, for they retain it.—There is a kind of fascination in them,—when once we begin a volume, we cannot lay it aside, but drive through to the end of it, and yet upon reflexion we despise and reject them.

HORTENSIVS: They are certainly dangerous books for youth,—they create and encourage the wildest excursions of imagination, which it is, or ought to be, the care of parents and preceptors to restrain, and to give them a just and true representation of human nature, and of the duties and practice of common life.

EUPHRASIA: You speak as if it was the general study of parents and teachers in our days to educate our youth to wisdom and virtue.—Is it not their ambition to make them knowing rather than wise, and fashionable rather than virtuous?—thus they are hackney'd in the ways of the world, and though ignorant of every thing that is really good and estimable, they are *old* before their days are half spent.

SOPHRONIA: The books that are put into the hands of youth, do in a great measure direct their pursuits and determine their characters; it is therefore of the first consequence that they should be well chosen. . . .

—from EVENING XII—

EUPHRASIA: A Circulating Library³ is indeed a great evil,—young people are allowed to subscribe to them, and to read indiscriminately all they contain; and thus both food and poison are conveyed to the young mind together.

HORTENSIVS: I should suppose that if books of the worst kind were excluded; still there would be enough to lay a foundation of idleness and folly.—A person used to this kind of reading will be disgusted with every thing serious or solid, as a weakened and depraved stomach rejects plain and wholesome food.

SOPHRONIA: There is truth and justice in your observation,—but how to prevent it?

HORTENSIVS: There are yet more and greater evils behind.—The seeds of vice and folly are sown in the heart.—the passions are awakened,—false expectations are raised.—A young woman is taught to expect adventures and intrigues,—she expects to be addressed in the style of these books, with the language of flattery and adulation.—If a plain man addresses her in rational terms and pays her the greatest of compliments,—that of desiring to spend his life with her,—that is not sufficient, her vanity is disappointed, she expects to meet a Hero in Romance.

EUPHRASIA: No *Hortensius*,—not a Hero in Romance, but a fine Gentleman in a Novel:—you will not make the distinction.

HORTENSIVS: I ask your pardon, I agreed to the distinction and therefore ought to observe it. . . .

From this kind of reading, young people fancy themselves capable of judging of men and manners, and that they are knowing, while involved in the profoundest ignorance. They believe themselves wiser than their parents and guardians, whom they treat with contempt and ridicule:—Thus armed

³The first Circulating, or lending, Libraries were created by British booksellers in the 1780s; about three-quarters of their members were female. For the first time, middle-class women had access to a wide range of books (the annual subscription fee was about one pound); this produced both an increased literacy rate and a new audience for literary culture in England.

with ignorance, conceit, and folly, they plunge into the world and its dissipations, and who can wonder if they become its victims?—For such as the foundation is, such will be the superstructure.

EUPHRASIA: All this is undoubtedly true, but at the same time would you exclude all works of fiction from the young reader?—In this case you would deprive him of the pleasure and improvement he might receive from works of genius, taste and morality.

HORTENSIVS: Yes, I would serve them as the Priest did *Don Quixote's* library, burn the good ones for being found in bad company. . . .

EUPHRASIA: Pray *Hortensius*, is all this severity in behalf of our sex or your own?

HORTENSIVS: Of both.—Yet yours are most concerned in my remonstrance for they read more of these books than ours, and consequently are most hurt by them.

EUPHRASIA: You will then become a Knight errant, to combat with the windmills, which your imagination represents as Giants, while in the mean time you leave a side unguarded.

HORTENSIVS: And you have found it out.—Pray tell me without metaphors, your meaning in plain English?

EUPHRASIA: It seems to me that you are unreasonably severe upon these books, which you suppose to be appropriated to our sex, (which however is not the case):—not considering how many books of worse tendency, are put into the hands of the youth of your own, without scruple.

HORTENSIVS: Indeed!—how will you bring proofs of that assertion?

EUPHRASIA: I will not go far for them. I will fetch them from the School books, that generally make a part of the education of young men.—They are taught the History—the Mythology—the morals—of the great Ancients, whom you and all learned men revere.—But with these, they learn also—their Idolatry—their follies—their vices—and every thing that is shocking to virtuous manners.—*Lucretius* teaches them that *fear* first made Gods—that men grew out of the earth like trees, and that the indulgence of the passions and appetites, is the truest wisdom.—*Juvenal* and *Persius* describe such scenes, as I may venture to affirm that Romance and Novel-writers of any credit would blush at:—and *Virgil*—the modest and delicate *Virgil*, informs them of many things, they had better be ignorant of.—As a

woman I cannot give this argument its full weight. — But a hint is sufficient, — and I presume you will not deny the truth of my assertion.

HORTENSIUS: I am astonished — admonished — and convinced! — I cannot deny the truth of what you have advanced, I confess that a reformation is indeed wanting in the mode of Education of the youth of our sex.

SOPHRONIA: Of both sexes you may say . . .

. . . It is now that I may enter upon my office of Moderator. — *Hortensius* would prohibit the reading all Novels in order to exclude the bad ones. *Euphrasia* would make a separation in favour of works of Genius, taste, and morality, she would recommend such methods of preventing the mischiefs arising from novel reading, as are moderate, prudent, and above all *practicable*.

The objections to bad books of this species, are equally applicable to all other kinds of writing, —

indecent novels, indecent plays, essays, memoirs, dialogues are equally to be exploded: but it does not follow that all these kinds of writing are to be extirpated, because some are bad. By the same kind of reasoning we might plead for the prohibition of all kinds of writing; for excellent and unexceptionable works of every species, may be contrasted with vicious and immoral ones. All these objections amount to no more than that bad books are bad things, but shall we therefore prohibit reading?

HORTENSIUS: You have spoken to some purpose — I know that mine is an *Utopian* scheme, and I acknowledge that *Euphrasia's* is practicable, if parents and guardians would give due attention to it.

EUPHRASIA: Then we are agreed at last, — Selection is to be strongly recommended, and good books to be carefully chosen by all that are concerned in the education of youth