

The Roman à Clef Reconsidered a review of Sean Latham, *The Art of Scandal: Modernism, Libel Law, and the Roman à Clef* Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009.

The roman à clef has taken on derogatory connotations among book reviewers today, precluding it from receiving the sort of serious literary criticism befitting of a *novel*. Once revealed as containing thinly disguised real people, the newly published book tends to be written off as lazy, lacking creativity, gossipy, even vengeful. Sean Latham's timely *The Art of Scandal* proposes a host of alternative possibilities for the genre. Countless icons of modernism, including James Joyce's *Ulysses* have been accused of precariously toeing the line between novel and roman à clef. Furthermore, such works owe their canonicity in part to the libel trials and public debates that made them so scandalous to begin with. As the title *The Art of Scandal* suggests, scandal plays a role in high art, and Sean Latham intends to not only demonstrate why, but to restore the roman à clef to its rightful place in a modernist history that privileges the novel. As he points out right from the start, today's celebrity-driven culture, which thrives on blockbuster "chick-lit" such as *The Devil Wears Prada*, is the right context for a look at why the roman à clef has doubly suffered – for defying aesthetic conditions of modernism as well as for violating legal norms. In light of the roman à clef's resurgence in this form, older texts are perhaps more at risk than ever of being critically neglected.

Our reluctance to provide an English translation for the genre epitomizes the type of obstacles it faces. The French persists, implying that the genre has nothing to do with the English literary tradition or conception of "novel." (33-34) Gender, too, has had an impact on the genre's critical reception, as Latham explores throughout his book – detailing Oscar Wilde controversies and concluding with a section on Jean Rhys and her gender-ambiguous *nom de guerre*. Uniting law and literature throughout, the book begins by charting the genre's vicissitudes, then considers Wilde alongside Freud's *Dora: An Analysis of a Case Study of Hysteria*. This is a trenchant example of the roman à clef's pertinence as it maintains patient confidentiality while disseminating Freud's theories in a readable format. Latham then outlines the history of libel law, presenting noteworthy anecdotes along the way. A discussion of Joyce's and Lewis's run-ins with libel ensues. The final chapter deals with Huxley, Lawrence, and Rhys and their circle – a fitting conclusion, predicated as it is on gossip and social exchange among writers as it played out simultaneously in the public and private spheres.

Fittingly self-referential for a modernist text involving the courtroom, Latham's argument takes the shape of a legal defense. His opening remarks remind us that to be an educated reader, especially when reading modernist texts requires a decisive rejection of biography as an instrument for locating meaning in text. We are taught in high school to distinguish the poet from the speaker, and in college cautioned to look out for narrative bias. The roman à clef, then, mandates a different type of engagement, calling into question the very way we read. Besides this fundamental and perhaps threatening quality, it also defies modernism's imperatives, namely the goal of absolute aesthetic autonomy. Throughout the rest of the book, Latham presents an array of evidence—archival and textual alike, in a persuasive manner with literary flourish, thereby implying on a stylistic level the extent to which law and literature converge.

Indeed Latham's style borrows from modernism and the roman à clef in equal measure. Employing personification elevates the genre by giving it agency, subliminally turning it into a metaphor for a character in a novel. For instance, the roman allegedly "stalks the novel" (17) throughout the 19th century, when it has ostensibly disappeared from the public sphere. Reemerging in the 20th century, "the roman à clef's distinctive social life" (164) further lends

agency to form, when its publication demands that “reviews greet it” (164), effectively rendering it socially engaged. Furthermore, despite the wide variety of texts treated here, each is considered as an object, in a very tangible sense, as it negotiates the at times more abstract “mass-mediated cultural marketplace.” (166) Reproductions of legal documents, and other archival findings, especially images of original dust jackets and descriptions of them (146, and 161-162, for example) Latham dug out of archives recur throughout the text. Prefaces ironically beginning, “This is a work of fiction...” further condition a reader’s approach to the roman à clef. By resuscitating such details, often neglected in literary criticism devoted to the prose in and of itself, Latham points out the precarious intersection between fact and fiction, the point where a piece of fiction becomes a very real part of our lives. Moreover, Latham incorporates such archival findings as pencil notes in Ezra Pound’s copy of Lewis’s *Apes of God* as an indicator of “notoriety.” Here, Latham like the roman à clef repeats gossip, in an altogether productive, creative, and meaningful way. In short, this structure serves as an example in and of itself of a book that resists easy categorization, thereby making use of the roman à clef’s own methods to defend it.

Latham has made a valuable contribution not only to modernist studies with *The Art of Scandal*, but also to the field of law and literature. It’s a great read, and a tribute to Latham’s cleverness that he so artfully weaves in a sense of a dramatic narrative to his insightful piece of literary criticism.