

Deborah Ross

*The Excellence of Falsehood: Romance, Realism, and Women's Contribution to the Novel*

Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1991. Pp. 249. \$29.00

Reviewed by Axel Knoenagel

In 1957, Ian Watt suggested in his seminal study, *The Rise of the Novel*, a pre-history of the traditional English novel which is characterized by the increasing use of realism by Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding to make possible the achievement of Jane Austen. Deborah Ross's book suggests that Austen's fiction—indisputably the culmination of eighteenth-century fiction and the starting point for that of the nineteenth—is based not only on the tradition of male realism Watt discusses, but also on the "opposite" tradition, that of women's romances. In a conscious yet indirect distancing from Watt (whose study is not mentioned in *The Excellence of Falsehood*), Ross describes "the history of the novel through the works of a few women novelists. The result is no more comprehensive than male-centered studies—but neither is it less so" (12).

Ross then proceeds to study the development of women's writing in the eighteenth century, ranging from Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688) to Jane Austen. The central dialectic dichotomy which informs the book is the conflict between (male-dominated) realism and romance writing, supposedly the domain in which female readers alone could be addressed. The study is strongly determined by the consideration of the social and personal situation in which the female authors found themselves.

The first chapters, on Behn's *Oroonoko*, demonstrates that such procedure has its traps. Ross spends so much time discussing Behn's personal sexual politics that the novel under consideration almost drops from view. To a certain degree, this problem arises inevitably from the book's intention. Ross's study of fiction written by women for women in a genre traditionally ascribed to women in order to put in perspective the development of British literature in general necessarily requires consideration of the authors and their positions, but *The Excellence of Falsehood* appears occasionally not as a genre study but as a biographical inquiry.

*The Excellence of Falsehood* is concerned with the attempt of women writers to liberate themselves from being relegated to writing romances (generally held to be inferior) and gain acceptance as authors of realistic texts (a term which has to be taken with much caution for the eighteenth century). Ross discusses the fiction of Delariviere Manley to indicate early attempts in this direction, but in the following chapter on two novels published in 1751 Ross has to argue that "because of the special nature of female experience and the special standards by which women were judged, Haywood's and Lennox's commitment to realism and instruction led them back to romance" (71).

Ross's study of Fanny Burney—whose novels form the subtext of the book's second half—suggests best the problems women authors encountered in their attempt to portray women's lives in such a way that their readers could find themselves in them: "... disliking romance, she nevertheless needed it to explain the reasons for her dislike and to express the traditional opinions that circumstances had made unorthodox" (111). The chapter on Burney, easily the best one of the study, indicates the limits set to women authors attempting realism. The ending of novels—whether realistic or "happy" according to the tradition of romance—becomes a key point. "Committed to realism or 'the appearance of truth,' Burney tinkered with this problem. . . . But the more she tinkered the more improbable, or romantic, her endings became" (131).

After a consideration of the Gothic writing of Ann Radcliffe—who succeeded in part where Burney had failed since by her use of symbolism, Radcliffe "uncovers women's problematic relation to what men had determined to be reality" (151)—Ross turns in conclusion to Jane Austen, whose successful blending of romance and realism created the foundation for the Victorian novel. She thus arrives on a different path at the same goal as Watt. And she has managed to demonstrate that Watt's genealogy of the British novel is convincing but not the only possible one: "The way had been cleared for the expression of Austen's talent by the struggles of her female predecessors to develop a fictional form that would contain women's lives, lives that themselves had been changed in the process of being described in more than a century of novels" (167). Regardless of the weaknesses mentioned earlier, *The Excellence of Falsehood* is a major accomplishment of the historiography of the novel and a valuable partner to Watt's *The Rise of the Novel*.

Carl Dolmetsch

"Our Famous Guest": *Mark Twain in Vienna*

Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1992. Pp. xx + 362. \$29.95

Reviewed by Marvin Fisher

Carl Dolmetsch knows both his subjects intimately—Mark Twain and Viennese society. He has great affection and admiration for both, but he is also aware of the flaws, faults, and foibles of each. He also succeeds in demonstrating that Twain's work stemming from this period is in every sense the intersection, conflation, or collision of his two subjects.

Rejecting the view that Mark Twain's final decades (1890-1910) were years of unrelieved decline, depression, and despair arising from a series of personal tragedies and financial misfortunes, Dolmetsch set out to record Mark Twain's varied experiences, the various personalities he encountered, and the effects on his subsequent writings, of the nearly two years that he spent in Vienna from 1897 to 1899. He was aided greatly by a little known 1953 Viennese dissertation on press reaction to the extended visit of the Clemens family. It listed hundreds of press reports and interviews and constituted a working bibliography that effectively accelerated the initial stages of this project.