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HEROIC DISOBEDIENCE

The Forced Marriage Plot and the British Novel, 1747-1880

Leah Grisham

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Grisham's "Heroic Disobedience" is a timely, incisive, and well-researched work on the British marriage plot, so universally infused in nineteenth-century reading and writing novelistic practices. As a whole, it considers how women, as either victims or actors within a larger patriarchal, capital-driven social system, have been integrated in our larger narrative history. Though Grisham writes of novels shaped by, and published within, a more transparently oppressive social context, it is easy to see how the experiences of the discussed fictional heroines are translatable to the lived experiences of many women today. Grisham's adroit ability to discuss how eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors were able to depict the nuanced networks designed against women in the period, is a very useful guide in the literary classroom. Though this monograph is quite specialized and speaks to the conventions of one novel genre, it has a long scope that details, even implicitly, how the genre evolved over the period.

Dr. Victoria Barnett-Woods

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About the author

Leah Grisham, Ph.D., is a freelance writer, scholar, and educator whose work focuses on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British literature, women's writing, and the history of women's rights. She earned her doctorate in literature from George Washington University in 2020, where she also taught classes on nineteenth-century horror stories, British colonialism, and twentieth-century sci-fi novels, among others. Her essays appear in peer-reviewed journals including 'Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies', 'Victorian Periodicals Review', 'Women's Writing', and 'ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830'. She is also a freelance writer and book critic for Publisher's Weekly, the Jewish Book Council, and 'Kveller'.

Summary

'Heroic Disobedience: The Forced Marriage Plot and the British Novel, 1747-1880' shows the ways in which eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels used what the author terms the forced marriage plot - a plot arc in which a greedy father tries to force his daughter into a marriage she does not want but that would be financially expedient to himself - to explore capitalism's detrimental impacts on women's right to autonomy. As capitalist economic practices replaced mercantilism, a woman's value was seen primarily in the economic sense. That is, men came to recognize that women - especially young, marriageable women - could be used as objects of exchange between men. Recognizing this phenomenon, the novelists considered in 'Heroic Disobedience' - Samuel Richardson, Charlotte Lennox, Mary Robinson, Charlotte Smith, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Stone, and Anthony Trollope - depict the very specific ways in which women were raised to become willing pawns in this system. Religious discourse, conduct guides, marriage and property laws, wages, lack of meaningful education, and inheritance practices combined to leave women with no other options besides dependence on their patriarchs. Importantly, authors who use the forced marriage plot go beyond exposing women's subjugation by creating - and celebrating - heroically disobedient heroines who believe, above all else, that they have the right to determine their own futures: futures in which they are autonomous agents, not subjected objects.

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