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# Reading Reynolds' Radicalism

*G. W. M. Reynolds: Nineteenth-Century Fiction, Politics, and the Press*. Anne Humpherys and Louis James, eds. Aldershot, England and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008. xviii + 296.

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<1> The editors of this collection of essays seek to remedy the neglect of "the most popular writer of his time" by bringing together scholars from different disciplines to create a "coherent study of a major figure" (1). As the five-page bibliography indicates, there has been a growing interest in Reynolds, but this volume is, as the editors claim, the first dedicated solely to him. The emphasis is on the big picture, the introduction and sixteen chapters covering a substantial proportion of Reynolds' prolific output with two articles on his engagements with French literature and society, four on his role as journalist, four on *The Mysteries of London* (1844-46), four on his other fictional works, and two on his "afterlife." This coverage, together with the fact that the essays focus on the major themes and characteristic formal features of his writings, will certainly make this volume the starting point for any scholarly investigation of Reynolds.

<2> The authors take up several key questions raised by Reynolds' work and career, the most vexed of which have to do with his politics. The essays dealing with the journalism address the question of whether he was fully committed to radicalism or merely sought to exploit it in order to appeal to his working-class audience, especially following the collapse of Chartism and the fading away of the *Northern Star* as the leading radical paper. The essays on the fiction address the related question of whether his novels were political commentaries or merely pot-boilers meant to appeal to the prurient tastes of the lower classes. For the most part, the essays set aside questions of aesthetic value, treating even matters such as genre and form in terms of their political rather than aesthetic significance. This is another way of saying that the authors do not seek to make claims for Reynolds as an artist, nor do they apologize for his lack of artistic originality, basing their claims for his importance instead on the impact his writings had on an enormous audience.

<3> While the essays on Reynolds' journalism do an effective job of assessing their politics, the more general nature of his politics remains elusive. Michael Shirley claims that Reynolds was "a radical at a young age . . . and never varied his essential stance" (76), but other authors more cautiously depict him as a "republican." It appears that he did not take a public stance in favor of the Chartist platform until 1848, and that even then, as two essays note, his commitment to it was

limited by the view — rejected by most Chartists — that universal suffrage should not be extended to the people until they are educated (35, 189). The difference here arises in part from how one defines radicalism, but the lack of precision also indicates the need for a full-scale biography tracing Reynolds' role in radical politics.

<4> Questions about the politics of Reynolds' fiction tend to center on the fact that the plots focus on a polarized world of aristocracy and underclass that does not quite mesh with the contemporary "realities" of Victorian England. This view began with Marx's dismissal of Reynolds as an opportunist and continues to underlie the Marxian view that Reynolds' novels were "dated" from the start because they critique the aristocracy rather than industrialists and entrepreneurs (a.k.a. the middle class), and that, moreover, they employ fantasy, gothic, and melodrama rather than some form of social realism or, to put it in more precisely Victorian terms, the conventions of the social problem novel. The essays rightly challenge the assumptions behind these criticisms. Juliet John restores the fiction to its context by contending that Victorian radicals were not necessarily anti-capitalist and even saw the free market as a weapon against the class system, and Ellen Bayuk Rosenman rightly points out that the critique of the aristocracy is justified by the fact that it continued to dominate British politics throughout the century. The authors might also have noted that the Marxian criticism of Reynolds assumes a tripartite model of class — in which the middle class had assumed ascendancy over the aristocracy —whereas contemporary radical discourse employed a dichotomous model of class that corresponds quite precisely to Reynolds' narratives of antagonism between the lower classes and the ruling elite.

<5> The main strategy of these essays, however, is to finesse the question of Reynolds' authorial intentions by focusing on reader response. Rather than try to read Reynolds' politics into, or even from, his texts, the authors attempt to define what work the texts did for a politicized working class. The assumption is that, regardless of how deeply committed to addressing the needs of the working class he was, Reynolds could only have succeeded in gaining such a loyal audience by deploying a rhetoric that appealed to them. Moreover, the essays quite justifiably set aside the assumption that the novels appealed to the prurient interests of a poorly educated and rather crude working class on the implicit grounds that to do so is to demean their intelligence and underestimate their political savvy.

<6> Consequently, nearly every essay comments on the reader reception of Reynolds' work and the figure of "the reader" appears repeatedly. We see this from the outset in the editors' introduction, which is equally divided between a survey of his career and the reception of his works. King contributes an excellent multi-dimensional approach to the reconstruction of the implied reader of *Reynolds's Miscellany*, and Shirley, who takes up similar questions, concludes his essay by imagining how a soldier might have responded to certain features of *Reynolds's Newspaper*. In the discussions of fiction, Anne Humpherys contends that readers would see the villains of his novels as synecdoches for a corrupt social system, Louis James conjectures that Reynolds moved away from Newgate plots toward historical fiction in order to appeal to a female audience, and Sucheta Bhattacharya asks what translations of Reynolds' novels can tell us about how a Bengali audience read them. Of course, as King wisely concedes, implied readers do not necessarily correspond to real readers, but the fact that large numbers of real readers were loyal readers of his writings justifies this search for their appeal.

<7> Indeed, some of the most productive analyses arise from the resulting attention to form and genre. Rather than simply assume that Reynolds' use of gothic melodrama was retrograde, they investigate what work it does for the reader. King, providing the volume's richest exploration of the journalism in relation to reader response, usefully brings the descriptive framework he developed in his book on the *London Journal* to bear on *Reynolds's Miscellany*. Humpherys employs Edward Mendelsohn's conception of the encyclopedic novel as an effective way to comprehend the enormous appeal of that loosest of baggy monsters, the *Mysteries of London*, and its sequel, *The Mysteries of the Court of London* (1848-56), which in total ran to some nine million words. John reads novels depicting artist figures as addressing the question about the relation of commercialism to politics that concerns so many of these essays. Ian Haywood provides a fascinating analysis of the afterlife of Reynolds's newspapers — which survived with various changes in name and format until 1962! — through a reading of the centenary issue. And Rosenman reads plots depicting characters who discover that they are the illegitimate children of aristocrats as drawing on a radical "social imaginary" envisioning the return of the land to the people. The latter provides the volume's most cogent reckoning with the question of why Reynolds continued to focus on the aristocracy and how we can read his fiction in relation to his radical politics.

<8> Readers of this journal will be interested to note that in these essays the reader tends to be classed but not gendered. Given that Chartism, which sought universal male suffrage, gendered the lower classes male, it may be worth considering the extent to which Reynolds did so as well. His use of erotic titillation involving the male gaze certainly suggests that his earlier work, at least, tended to do so. James' speculation that Reynolds may at some point have sought to make his novels more appealing to a female audience reminds us that not all working-class readers would have responded to them in the same way.

<9> In this respect, the book not only sums up of the state of Reynolds studies, but also suggests several avenues for further research. As I've already suggested, it makes clear the need for further study of Reynolds' political career. While the volume demonstrates that Reynolds' place in literary history is at present a thriving area of investigation, his place in social history remains under-developed. The fact that three essays explore the relation between Reynolds' domestic politics and matters of empire suggest yet another area worth further investigation. In sum, this collection should stimulate a diversity of research projects. Who could ask for anything more?