

The Ends of Excess in Nineteenth-Century Political Economy and the Novel

Economic Woman: Demand, Gender, and Narrative Closure in Eliot and Hardy. Deanna K. Kreisel. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012. 309 pp.

Reviewed by **Supritha Rajan**, University of Rochester

<1>The nineteenth-century novel has long provided literary critics with a fertile ground for addressing capitalist economics, whether that be in its depiction of a society ruled by the logic of the commodity, consumerism, and credit, or in its imaginative meditations on political economic theory. The latter preoccupation has, until recently, tended to privilege the novel's engagements with Marxist-inflected understandings of labor and production. With the publication of Regenia Gagnier's *The Insatiability of Human Wants*, Catherine Gallagher's *The Body Economic*, and Mary Poovey's *Genres of the Credit Economy*, however, literary critics have become more attuned to broader developments in political economic theory during the second half of the nineteenth century.⁽¹⁾ The increasing emphasis on consumer preference and demand among economists associated with the Marginal Revolution has pointed critics to parallel concerns in nineteenth-century aesthetic and cultural discourse.

<2>Deanna K. Kreisel's *Economic Woman: Demand, Gender, and Narrative Closure in Eliot and Hardy* seeks to add to these interventions by examining how issues of gender, specifically the excesses embodied by a female character in novels by Eliot and Hardy, emblemize uncertainties inherent to the function of demand in political economic theory as it stretches from David Ricardo and Thomas Malthus into later marginalists like William Stanley Jevons. Kreisel's book examines recurring metaphors of surplus, excess, and circulation that, she claims, appear in nineteenth-century economic theory and in the novels by Eliot and Hardy. These metaphors point to a pervasive anxiety that the economy does not self-adjust supply to demand but is prone to catastrophic imbalances. Kreisel reads the "ever-present fear of economic stagnation" (4) within economic theory as a problem of closure that has its corollary in the realist novels by Eliot and Hardy. In Eliot and Hardy, the economy's potential for stagnation and glut is figured as a wayward woman whose aberrant excess and threat to the model of a self-enclosed economy is delimited, at the level of narrative closure, through either her marriage or her death. These novelistic patterns "become fully legible only when we consider their engagement with contemporary discourse and their pervasive deployment of metaphors drawn from political economy" (24).

<3>In order to demonstrate how the novels draw on these metaphors, Kreisel begins her book with a lengthy first chapter on political economic theory that contrasts the laissez-faire economics of Ricardo and Herbert Spencer, each of whom prize capitalist accumulation and the self-regulating capacities of the economic system, with “early demand function theorists” like Thomas Malthus and John Ruskin, who underscore the importance of consumption and caution against excessive accumulation (26). Malthus’s anxieties regarding gluts and underconsumption represent a pessimistic strain of thinking that haunts Spencer’s optimistic account of laissez-faire capitalism. Throughout the analysis of Malthus and Spencer, and in the remainder of the chapter, Kreisel repeatedly turns to Ruskin. Kreisel not only shows how Ruskin’s economic thought shares ground with Malthus and Spencer, but she also uses Ruskin to uncover complex strands of interrelatedness between varied schools of economic thought over the course of the nineteenth century. Ruskin is important to Kreisel’s argument because he provides one of two textual examples from political economic writings linking gendered notions of effeminacy and sexuality to capitalist division of labor and economic stagnation. By showing Ruskin’s affinities to divergent nineteenth-century economic schools, Kreisel implicitly wants to suggest that Ruskin’s work represents broader patterns in political economy *tout court*.

<4>The chapters that follow each examine a novel’s metaphorical engagement with economic problems of surplus, stagnation, and gluts, as well as how these problems impact narrative closure. The first and second chapters examine Eliot’s *Adam Bede* (1859) and *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), respectively. Kreisel argues in these chapters that the fear of excess/surplus in economic theory is figured in Eliot’s novels through the characters of Hetty and Maggie, both of whom represent excessive desire and consumption that the novel metaphorically eliminates through their death in order to return the economy to a state of holistic closure. *Adam Bede* contrasts the excess that Hetty represents to “the striving for balance that characterizes the economic world of the novel” (95). This image of a self-enclosed economy is threatened by images of castration, dismemberment, and excess figured through Hetty that resemble the images of perverse femininity found in Ruskin and Adam Smith.

<5>The discussion of *The Mill on the Floss* addresses the nagging question of the novel’s problematic ending by claiming that the ending no longer seems failed if we read it in relation to political economic anxieties regarding consumption/demand. Kreisel claims that the novel’s presentation of two plots — one structured through Maggie and the other through Tom — contrasts Maggie’s engagement with metaphor, excess, and superfluity to Tom’s proto-capitalist preoccupation with growth, accumulation, and demand. The problematic ending, she claims, is an attempt to “[suture] the rift between the two narratives” (114). While readers could object to Kreisel’s alignment of the old-fashioned Tullivers with capitalism, this chapter nevertheless offers the most convincing treatment of how the conflict between optimistic laissez-faire capitalism and the pessimistic Malthusian fear of excess, underconsumption, and stagnation surfaces metaphorically in novels. Maggie challenges the image of a closed economic circuit by figuring both in her life and in her death the problematic of excess and superfluity. In this way, the abrupt ending and lack of satisfying closure indicates the economy’s capacity to be undone by excessive appetites/demand.

<6>The third and fourth chapters on Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) are less convincing, largely because their relationship to political economy and the book's broader claims are less clear and cogently developed. Kreisel's analysis of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* focuses primarily on how the narrative point of view shifts from Henchard to his daughter Elizabeth-Jane, the symbolic relationship between exchange and kinship, and the circulation of "economies of knowledge" (163) — all of which render the narrative of economic competition between Henchard and Farfrae "subsidiary" (150). Unlike other chapters, which examine a female character whose excess is eliminated through death, Kreisel here argues that the novel feminizes and expels Henchard while Elizabeth-Jane embodies "masculine principles of narrative omniscience and governance of economic processes" (22). Despite her power, Kreisel contends that Elizabeth-Jane represents the absence of desire/demand and thus figures the possibility of economic stagnation, but stagnation here is configured not in terms of economic circulation but as the absence of readerly interest in Elizabeth-Jane and economic motives.

<7>The book's final chapter on *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* concentrates on how Tess's dual inheritances from father and mother relate to two contrasting narratives in the novel: the narrative of paternal inheritance and historical forces written palimpsestically on bodies and the narrative of maternal inheritance that the novel suppresses and which Kreisel links to individualism and the internalized economies of demand associated with the marginal school. Kreisel uncovers this suppressed narrative by showing how it is linked to a further hidden obsession with the supply and demand of milk. Drawing on varied archival materials, Kreisel relates Tess's work as a dairymaid to broader Victorian debates about the demand for milk. By attending to this suppressed maternal narrative, she shows how the novel relates Tess's excessive sexuality to the "horrors of surplus," which can only be contained through her death (231).

<8>Kreisel's examination of the relationship between political economy and the novel is laudable for the sustained treatment it gives to gender. In contrast to previous attention to the female shopper, the book furnishes an alternate account of gendered representations of consumption. It may seem risky, however, to ground a broader argument on the relationship between political economy and the novel through such a narrow selection of novels, particularly given the agency Kreisel accords to the novel. Kreisel contends that the novel not only draws on metaphors latent in political economy, but also that tensions in political economy are "due to... the realist novel" (4). Despite this methodological problem, Kreisel's textual selections are also one of its strengths. By focusing intensively on a single novel in each chapter, Kreisel's close-readings trace numerous textual patterns that relate her broader argument on demand to, for example, ethical notions of consequence and debt. This attention to multiple, interlocking textual patterns in a single novel can, at times, obscure the argumentative drive of the chapters as a whole. In this context, it would have been useful if Kreisel had included a conclusion to her book, not only to recapitulate the arguments in previous chapters, but also to address the broader stakes and implications of these argumentative threads. One wonders, for example, whether these patterns surface in other novelists of the period, if fin-de-siècle or modernist literary representations of wayward women reflect parallel developments in economic theory. That Kreisel's book raises these questions suggests the fruitful directions in which critics might pursue her insightful claims.

Endnotes

(1)Regenia Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000; Catherine Gallagher, *The Body Economic: Life, Death, and Sensation in Political Economy and the Victorian Novel*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006; Mary Poovey, *Genres of the Credit Economy: Mediating Value in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.(^)