Fanny: Being the True History of the Adventures of Fanny Hackabout-Jones Short Guide

Fanny: Being the True History of the Adventures of Fanny Hackabout-Jones by Erica Jong

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Characters

Fanny flees her country home in pursuit of London and literature after her foster father has seduced her. Her adventures are designed to illuminate social concerns and reimagine specific aspects of eighteenth-century life.

Thrust by disaster (and male villainy) into one extreme situation after another, Fanny generally finds a way to turn the circumstances to her own good. She joins a band of witches, a gang of highway robbers, a stable of prostitutes, the crew of a slave ship, and a grandly idealistic pirate band.

Although the novel's narrative span is quite brief — events move with breathtaking speed — Fanny's first-person voice grows from innocence to maturity. She engages less in adolescent maundering and second-hand philosophizing as worldly experience gives her grounds for her own opinions and pregnancy forces her to become both independent and responsible. Other women are also important to Fanny's development. The mulatto servant Susannah provides mothering but is driven to despair by her own circumstances. Most significantly, the witch and midwife Isobel is at last revealed as Fanny's birth mother — a not unexpected plot twist for an eighteenth-century novel, but one with strong thematic resonance.

Social Concerns

By writing an imitation eighteenthcentury novel, Jong exemplifies one tenet of feminist scholarship: The work in almost every field of knowledge must be re-evaluated — and often redone — once it is recognized that men have picked topics for scientific investigation, written literature, recorded history, and engaged in philosophical speculation without even realizing that masculine privilege shaped their view of the world. The great majority of women who appear in literature written before 1800 are men's women: that is, their thoughts, feelings, behavior, concerns and sexual responses were invented by male authors. In Fanny, Jong writes a book that an eighteenth-century woman with her protagonist's literary ambitions might have produced had she not been culturally silenced.

The first-person narrator, Fanny Hackabout-Jones, consistently gives voice to the underside of history. Visiting London, she notices the beggars, the maimed, the imprisoned and helpless. Pornography's other aspect is exposed by the laughter — and disgust — of the prostitutes who take part in scenes from eighteenth-century erotic classics. A midwife and a medical man contend for the right to supervise the birth of Fanny's child. Jong does not, however, simply reproduce twentieth-century feminist arguments in archaic language. Concerns about race, marriage, incest, prostitution, pornography, health care or education are infused with an imagined eighteenthcentury sensibility that sometimes casts light on the modern situation.

Techniques

The technical delight of Fanny is the rollicking reconstruction of the eighteenth-century novel, complete with elaborate chapter headings, abrupt transitions, direct addresses to the reader, abundant bawdiness, and tourde-force inventories of material detail or curious knowledge. Jong writes throughout in a language that is true to the spirit and rhythm of the period without creating insurpassable barriers for modern readers.

Themes

Fanny is a novel of ideas as well as an exuberant recreation of eighteenthcentury picaresque style. Like the young protagonists of fiction written during the Age of Reason, Fanny searches for the meaning of life. She speculates irreverently on philosophical systems which consider only the behavior of men towards one another and notices the gap between the Alexander Pope's elevated sentiments and his personal lechery. The book's feminist themes are expressed by shifting perception so that the matter of human life is filtered through a woman's consciousness. Since Fanny notices that her own behavior changes when (for the sake of protection) she wears men's clothes and the book's most satisfactory male characters are bisexual, the story implicitly endorses an androgynous ideal and a social system in which neither sex has dominion.

The book's second major theme is its rehabilitation of witchcraft as a religion in which women are bound to the Goddess for the service of other women.

The novel's witches preserve herbal lore, heal the sick, aid the abused, bring crops to harvest, and — most prominently — understand the birthing of babies. The thematic emphasis on the witchcraft's matriarchal nature provides an alternate vision of the philosophy, science and society that might follow from the worship of a goddess of life.

Literary Precedents

Jong draws most frankly on Tom Jones (1749). Fanny picks "Jones" when she needs a surname and is, like Fielding's hero, a foundling of uncertain parentage who leaves a country home for startling adventures on the road to London and victimization as a wideeyed innocent in the big city. Defoe's Moll Flanders (1722) also exercises some influence on characterization and milieu. Fanny's narrative is written on the internal pretext of setting straight the story told in John Cleland's erotic classic Fanny Hill: or Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure. Fanny Hackabout-Jones is angry that Cleland — who was her client one night in the brothel — misrepresented her in his book.

Related Titles

Serenissima (1987) explores sexual passion from the perspective of a liberated, self-possessed heroine, Jessica Pruitt. Jong's fiction is noteworthy because her Fear of Flying (1973) was an early woman's novel that dealt explicitly with woman's sexuality. All of her fiction, and much of her poetry, continues to address this theme. Jong's thematic concerns reflect the contemporary interest in the psychology of the sexuality of women, but, it should be noted that her treatment of this issue is a popularization — even an exaggeration of these concerns. Her stories reflect women of unbridled passions and appetites; often these women seem more like stereotypical men's libidos dressed in women's clothing. And Jong's fiction has been criticized for being too bawdy, too interested in carnality at the expense of other aspects of the female psyche. Perhaps Jong's reason for focusing so much attention on women with such hearty sexual appetites is to force her readers to see women as having a legitimate right to their passions. Ultimately, Jessica, Serenissima's main character, must examine the reasons that motivate her actions, to explore why she is so in need of a man's attention — sexual and otherwise.

Jessica Pruitt, a forty-three-year-old American actress, is serving as a judge for a film festival in Venice. When the festival concludes, she hopes to get the part of Shylock's daughter in a surreal film derived from Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice. Midway through this festival, she falls ill with strep throat and enters a dream-fantasy world of the Venice of 1592 where she is the daughter of Shylock. In this dream-fantasy she also meets and falls in love with Shakespeare, who is in Venice with his lover, the Earl of Southampton.

Like her sisters in Jong's other novels, Jessica has a taste for the carnal, and we follow her through a series of sexually explicit exploits. As with her other female protagonists, Jong's Jessica is intelligent, fearless, gorgeous, and sexually voracious. The book chronicles her sexual adventures, her appetites, and her clash with the culture and mores of sixteenth-century Europe.

The other main characters in the story — Shakespeare, the Earl of Southampton, and Shylock (Shalach in Jong's novel) — are portrayed as one would expect from reading history and Shakespeare's plays. Yet they are also new because Jong shows them face-to-face and as seen through the eyes of Jessica Pruitt — often her bedroom eyes.

Jong's practice of having Shakespeare speaking lines from his plays or for other characters to speak lines drawn from his sonnets or plays, either in the original or slightly altered to meet the needs of the moment, strikes some critics as forced and awkward.

Jong's novel is in the tradition of the dream/fairy tale in which a character falls asleep and awakens to an alternative reality. In this setting the character generally learns things about herself and perhaps finds answers to important questions or discovers solutions to troublesome problems. When the character awakens, it is to a clarified and

better understood "real" world. Virginia Woolf's Orlando (1928) is the best twentieth-century antecedent of Serenissitna. The success of these types of alternative histories usually depends on how well the writer brings the past to life. Serenissima reveals Jong's thorough research into sixteenth-century European history, culture, and customs as well her knowledge of Shakespeare's life and works. Such fantasy history novels allow a writer to freely speculate on historical figures and examine their main character's personality and problems from a unique perspective.

At the book's conclusion, Jessica awakens from her dream to discover that it has paralleled the script of the surreal film in which she will now star as Shylock's daughter.

Serenissima also displays Jong's penchant for celebrity in that the novel refers to modern figures popular in contemporary Western culture. For example, Julia is friends with Liv Ullman and Jackie Onassis. She is also a very literate woman, making references to John Ruskin, Lord Byron, James Joyce, and the Manhattan PEN group, among others. With this technique Jong attempts to give Serenissima a patina of erudition, although sometimes its effect seems closer to name dropping. But readers of popular fiction like to be entertained, and late twentieth-century popular culture abounds in stories of the rich, the famous, and the scandalous. Jong's inclusion of these elements is as much a reflection of the popular interests of her time as an attempt to give the story a more glamorous historical cachet.

Most critics either appreciate or intensely dislike Jong's work, and their reaction to Serenissima is no exception.

As she did in Fanny (1980), which was set in the eighteenth century, Jong's new historical novel interweaves events, places, and persons of the twentieth century with those of the past. She shows a knack for picking out eye-catching historical particulars and working them into her story. In Serenissima, Jong frequently uses Elizabethan language and Shakespearean material to establish a sense of historical place quite different from the twentieth century. Many critics find that Jong's ear for Elizabethan English is not very acute and that it detracts from the historical credibility she is trying to create.

Jong's earlier novel, Fanny, made more effective use of references to historical people and places. In Serenissima, the characters of Shylock and Shakespeare are less successfully realized than were Alexander Pope or Jonathan Swift in Fanny.

More typical of her earlier work is Jong's investigation of the unbridled female libido. Like Fear of Flying, Serenissima offers an ample account of its heroine's sexual exploits; this time, however, the language is Elizabethan and the lovers are historical figures, but the story she tells is yet another bedroom adventure whose historical province is timeless.

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