

gender or globalisation studies as well as those who work at the intersection of these fields.

Compelling Engagements: Feminism, Rape Law and Romance Fiction

by Wendy Larcombe, The Federation Press, 2005, Sydney, pp. 170, pb., ISBN 1 86287 525 1

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At first glance, the victim in rape law and the heroine in romance fiction appear worlds apart, but Wendy Larcombe's book demonstrates the startling similarities in their representation as feminine subjects. The book's central aim is to explain how the fictioning of femininity is able to be deployed so punishingly against women in the applications of rape law, and yet function as the basis of a fantasy of female success and self-realisation in women's romance (p 4). Although fiction has the potential to challenge dominant gender-based power relationships, and modern romance fiction may superficially appear to do so, Larcombe argues that genuine transformation is impossible while certain constructions of feminine subjectivity work symbiotically to legitimate, maintain and extend the authority of the institutions reproducing them (p 9).

For the past few decades feminists have challenged the conventionally gendered subjectivities in both rape law and romance fiction and although both the law and romance novels have changed in recent years, the gendered subjects remain remarkably untransformed. Larcombe acknowledges that both rape law and romance fiction have also consistently produced divisions, disagreements and reservations amongst feminist critics (p 4) and explores where and why feminist critiques of rape law and romance fiction have stalled or been frustrated (p 5). She does so by a textual analysis of rape statutes, judgments, excerpts from trial transcripts, cross-examination, and judges' comments to juries. She also analyses romances from two Harlequin Mills and Boon series, as

well as promotional material and media coverage of romance reading. Feminist critique is both the method and object of her analysis.

Each section of the book pairs a chapter on rape law and a chapter on romance fiction. Each pairing has a common theme: the terms through which the normative subjects of rape law and romance fiction are reproduced; whether and how compliance with these represented subjects is required through the positioning of rape complainants and romance readers; and the vested interests of the criminal justice system and romance fiction publishers respectively in the constructions of the “rape complainant” and the “romance reader”. This structure allows readers to choose their own path through the book, concentrating on either the romance fiction or legal themes, or following the “he said, she said” comparison of law and literature in each section (p 5).

Wendy Larcombe is well-placed to examine both rape law and fiction. She has been involved in a wide range of organisations working towards rape law reform, and she has also participated in women’s publishing as a member of the Sybylla Press collective. She has written extensively on both feminist legal studies and popular fiction. Her interest and experience in developing students’ writing skills at the University of Melbourne is also evident in the clarity of expression and clearly developed arguments throughout her book.

Larcombe suggests that both rape law and romance fiction prescribe, respectively, the minimum and the ideal terms and conditions for the conduct of heterosexual relations. Rape law requires a minimum standard based on respect for the woman’s autonomy, whereas in romance fiction all the woman’s desires must be satisfied (p 2). In rape law the woman can say “yes” or “no” to penetration only, whereas in romance fiction the woman can object to or renegotiate the terms, implications, context, consequences and meaning of the sexual act/s (p 8). In both sets of texts, however, the feminine subject in the heterosexual exchange is in a disadvantaged position, based on a

construction of femininity as sexually vulnerable or disadvantaged, thus the protections and special conditions are necessary to mitigate the gendered inequalities of power. This gendered hierarchy is portrayed as natural, and its effects are mitigated so long as the feminine subject fulfils certain conditions necessary for the proper conduct of heterosexual relations (p 3). In summary, the feminine subject must be worthy and deserving of the protections and rewards offered. Larcombe explores the promises of this normative femininity in order to explain why it is so resilient.

Larcombe examines the fictions of the “real” rape victim and the “ordinary” romance heroine, along with the subject positions of “rape complainant” and “romance reader”, in order to comprehend the textual relations that mediate women’s access to and engagements with both rape law and romance fiction. She identifies discrepancies between the ideal rape victim and the successful complainant, and between the typical romance heroine and the romance reader. She questions why the non-representative natures of the false rape complainant and the ideal romance consumer is not enough to transform them. She reaches some disturbing conclusions in relation to the vested interests of the criminal justice system and the romance publishing industry.

Larcombe concludes that the failure of rape law reforms hinges on the relationship between “without consent” and *mens rea* “wrongful intent” as the basis of the gender hierarchy in rape law. She also suggests that romance novels’ appeal is often linked to a transformative fiction in which masculine desires are reformed and the heroine rediscovers a cohesive sense of self. However, Larcombe is cynical about any supposed link between the representations of female subjectivity in both texts and women’s lives and experiences, finding that those representations are most firmly grounded in the interests of their authorising institutions.

Larcombe's book is an important and innovative study of the resilience and intransigence of the gendered subjects and subject positions reproduced by both rape law and romance fiction. It is a valuable contribution to feminist studies of both law and literature.

Book Notes

***Gender and Spanish Cinema* Steven Marsh and Parvati Nair eds
Oxford: Berg, 2004. ISBN 1 85973 791 9 pb x +230 pp.**

While it focuses on Spanish cinema, this book is invaluable for those interested in gender analyses of film, especially as they interact with the notion of a 'national cinema'. Aside from the excellent conceptual introduction, there are twelve specialist papers from a diverse range of perspectives, from psychoanalysis to urban geography. The book includes the expected chapters concerning films by Luis Buñuel and Pedro Almodóvar, as well as research on such diverse topics as cinema under Franco, the new sexual politics, and melodrama in the 1950s. Gender is considered in relation to such issues include vampirism, ethnicity, horror, memory and history. Contributors include scholars from the United States of America, the United Kingdom and Spain.