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Review: The Heroines of English Pastoral Romance

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The Heroines of English Pastoral Romance (Studies in Renaissance Literature: Volume 20).
By SUE P. STARKE. Cambridge: D.S. Brewer. 2007. 246pp. Price: £ 45.00.

The aim of this stimulating and well-written if somewhat loosely delimited study is to demonstrate that the female protagonists of the genre of pastoral romance, understood as a mixture of thematic components derived from epic and pastoral, increasingly serve to illustrate heroism during the genre's heyday between 1590 and 1650. More precisely, developing Frank Whigham's idea of play-as-work in Elizabethan courtesy theory, the author argues that the peaceful *locus amoenus* of pastoral romance is the workplace of the virtuous, gently born heroine populating certain works by Sidney, Spenser, Wroth, Fletcher, Milton and Marvell. Such a heroine, she claims, turns the traditional pastoral *otium* into a morally profitable *negotium* by transforming her suitor's erotic fervour into readiness for marriage, thus upholding her family's honour while also, in the process, embodying an emergent feminine subjectivity.

Clearly this requires a clarification of pastoral romance's generic status. Dr Starke claims that pastoral romance as understood here is identifiable chiefly by the recurrence of six themes (or "memes") imported from chivalric romance and pastoral respectively: the foundling, the loop-shaped quest through the *locus amoenus*, the rhetorical challenge, the chastity threat, the reconciliation of beauty to virtue; and familial reunification. Though all six need not be present in every work designated as pastoral romance, "a general pattern" must emerge. Unfortunately, Dr Starke does not discuss this pattern in the detail it deserves, nor does she provide more than a very basic survey of pastoral romance as a generic concept. She notes that Paul Alpers (*What is Pastoral?*, p. x) prefers a more restricted use of pastoral as a term, but detects an ally in Julius Caesar Scaliger who favours subject over form; beyond this, there are only a few fleeting references to authorities such as David Quint and Humphrey Tonkin. This is a pity. The book's thesis would have been well served by a more extended discussion of these matters. (Incidentally, the "memes" occasionally figuring as a synonym for 'theme' ultimately derive from Richard Dawkins, not from Helen Cooper or grammatical theory.)

However, this must not obscure the fact that Dr Starke's observations on the variations of the main theme – the *negotium* of the marriageable pastoral heroine – are in most cases very perceptive and enrich our understanding of the texts under scrutiny. I was particularly impressed with her examination of Sidney's *Arcadias*, Spenser's *Britomart* and *Pastorella*, Wroth's *Urania*, and Fletcher's *The Faithful Shepherdess*. However, as regards Milton's Eve and Marvell's lyric poems and "Upon Appleton House", the distance between Dr Starke's generic romance heroine and the protagonists of the actual texts becomes more pronounced (and is seemingly acknowledged by the author who notes that Eve "apparently has already achieved, before the fall, a marriage with Adam"). While many comments on the texts are acute, the wisdom of creating a genre that includes *Arcadia*, *Paradise Lost* and "Upon Appleton House" escapes me. To conclude: the dilemmas of the individual heroines examined here are often discussed with great sensitivity and tact, but the author's claims for her variety of pastoral romance are less convincing.