Nandini Das. *Renaissance Romance: The Transformation of English Prose Fiction, 1570–1620.*

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In the last twenty-five years, the English prose fiction written in Tudor and Stuart times has undergone a scholarly transformation from a poor, embarrassing ancestor of the novel to a complex, various, and rich set of texts and subgenres. Nandini Das argues that the most experimental features of the prose fiction produced by (among others) Sir Philip Sidney, Robert Greene, and Lady Mary Wroth are made possible by the generational play that their appropriation of romance offers in its Janus-like capacity to look backward and forward — toward the old and the young — with equally problematic enlistments of the wisdom of the old and the promise of the new. Building on scholarship by historians such as Anthony Esler and literary historians such as Richard Helgerson, Das translates the generational dynamic of romance into three sub-species, each one treated in two chapters, the first general and the second focused on a writer. First there is Sidney, whose embattled relationship to the great expectations of his elders comes the closest in the book to a literal generational conflict. Then there is Greene, whose career in prose translates questions of generation into problems of class, in which Greene serves as a synecdoche for the university wits whose questionable vocational status in the world of late Elizabethan humanism is both haunting and liberating. Finally there is Wroth, who translates questions of the old and the new into gendered terms — related to the generational because of the frequent elision between women and the young.

Along the way Das offers excellent local insights. For instance, she puts to incisive use the production of maps in the sixteenth century as she demonstrates how Sidney's *New Arcadia* transformed the *Old* and then again writers in the wake of Sidney transformed his legacy in turn. Another smart section reads Greene's rogue pamphlets not as a decisive and realistic break from his earlier Euphustic romances but as an urbanized rewriting of those works. The book is at its most abstract — and weakest — when at its most highly theoretical, whether the theory in question is Karl Mannheim's sociological treatment of generation or the brief afterword's foray into a few famous theories of the novel. On the other hand, one of the most attractive qualities of this book is the Janus-like position of the author herself, for she does an excellent job of mediating between older and newer criticism.

As Das seeks to establish what is new about the authorship, marketplace, or intellectual concerns of this prose fiction, she appears at times to disfavor potentially religious and moral dimensions of their concerns, favoring categories of class and gender, in one instance seeming almost dismissive of a historicism that might attend to Renaissance religion and moral philosophy, and providing brief forays into political contexts, for instance the rise of Prince Henry's court and the outbreak of the Thirty Years' War. Nonetheless, the book is often cogent in its account of the political engagements of Elizabethan and Stuart romance, for instance in Das's study of the court entertainments from which Sidney took his start in the refashioning of romantic fiction. And Das does come around to the moral dangers that Roger Ascham among others found rampant in the medieval heritage of romance. As she analyzes the generational dynamics of the fictions that she lingers on, Das resists easy formulas or neat and comfortable conclusions, whether about the vexing attitude toward elder wisdom in Sidney, the claims on singularity and independence of the middling or "mercenary" London writer, or the unleashing of women's subjectivity in Wroth. Indeed it is a certain tendency toward irresolution and interrogation that, according to Das, makes these fictions inventive and fascinating in the final analysis. So it is that if in the *New Arcadia* the wayward young need to be corrected but their elders cannot correct them: the young must find their own roundabout way to amendment, a lesson that dovetails with the message from the 1590s of Donne's Satire 3 according to which cocky young men need to learn to "doubt wisely." Such an overlap between romantic fiction and Elizabethan satire need not undercut Das's claim that there is something especially generational about the "permeable and amorphous" (115) romantic fiction of the period, though one wonders how she might connect her arguments to the productive skepticism and the posing of the new against the ancient that Francis Bacon was unleashing in the later decades of her study; or how the fictions of romance might compare to contemporary attempts by promoters of the Church of England to construct a genealogy at once primitive and modern.

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