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The Historical Novel in the Circulating Library

Sophia Lee’s imitators

In the last chapter I traced the beginnings of a generic cycle of historical fiction from Leland’s and Walpole’s experiments with reviving the medieval romance form in the 1760s to Reeve’s, Hutchinson’s, and Lee’s attempts over the next two decades to replicate the successes of these novels. But five novels do not a genre make. Genrification can only be said to have occurred when a set of conventions becomes repeated and repeatable. In the case of the historical novel, this occurs by the late 1780s, as the chronological listing of historical fiction in Table 1.1 illustrates. According to Altman’s model of generic formation, genres take shape through a process of imitation and experimentation. After a notable and unique success, producers try to reproduce that success by repeating features of the work. At first different producers will pick out different features to duplicate—settings, actors, plot structures, and so forth—until in some instances these experiments in imitation coalesce into a repeatable formula or generic cycle.

Some types of imitation are more blatant than others, and many of the historical novels of these years are such close imitations of their models as to border on plagiarism. In the case of the novels I am studying, The Recess’s phenomenal success, its sensational storyline, and its unique combination of gothic, sentimental, and historical features made it a prime candidate for imitation, and in the two decades following its publication a number of Recess knock-offs appeared on the shelves of the circulating library. Lee’s most direct imitators borrow at times her characters, mode of narration, and fundamental narrative premise, and even echo her language quite closely. Rosetta Ballin’s The Statue Room (1790), for example, borrows the Recess’s villain Queen Elizabeth, while
A. Kendall’s *Tales of the Abbey* (1800) features one of its two love interests, the Earl of Essex. F. C. Patrick’s *The Jesuit* (1799) goes even further, borrowing a cast of characters wholesale from *The Recess*, including Elizabeth, Mary, the Earl of Leicester, and the Duke of Norfolk, while simultaneously adopting Lee’s epistolary mode of narration. Lee’s imitators usually include some close variation on her novel’s premise of a secret (and fictional) child of a real historical figure, which Lee in turn borrowed from Prévost’s *Cleveland. The Statue Room*, for example, tells the story of the princess Adelfrida, a secret (but legitimate) daughter of Henry VIII, while *Tales of the Abbey* concerns Dudley, a secret (but legitimate) son of the Earl of Essex.

Agnes Musgrave’s *Cicely; or, the Rose of Raby* (1796) is perhaps the most blatant copy of *The Recess*. Like that novel, *Cicely* purports to be a packet of discovered letters that an ‘editor’ has modernized. In the introduction, Musgrave mimics Lee’s gestures of uncertainty from her advertisement. Musgrave speculates on the authenticity of her packet of letters, comparing them to both romance and history: ‘True, it speaks of many things mentioned by our Histories, yet such an air of romance hangs over it, and so many strange adventures are intermingled, I know not what to believe’ (n.p.). Similarly, Lee’s advertisement mentions both the probability and the romance of the papers she’s discovered: ‘A wonderful coincidence of events stamps the narration at least with probability, and the reign of Elizabeth was that of romance. If this Lady was not the child of fancy, her fate can hardly be paralleled’ (5). The opening of Musgrave’s novel also echoes Lee. Musgrave’s narrator begins by explaining her hesitancy to share her life story with her friend: ‘Had it been possible to have refused a request made by Matilda Lumley, I would have done so, when my beloved friend, at parting, begged me to gratify her fond curiosity, by giving a regular detail of a life she was conscious had been chequered by many a scene, as strange as various’ (1). Lee’s novel opens similarly, though in a more elevated tone of sentimentality: ‘Oh! why then, too generous friend, require me to live over my misfortunes?...Alas! your partial affection demands a memorial which calls back to being all the sad images buried in my bosom, and opens anew every vein of my heart’ (7). But even imitations as blatant as Musgrave’s could succeed in the age of the circulating library: *Cicely* went into four editions by 1831 (Blakey 61).

Lee’s popularity certainly bred imitations, but her success alone does not explain the growth in the quantity (if not the quality) of historical fiction in the 1780s. Across all genres the amount of fiction being published in Britain increases in the 1770s and 1780s; the number of new