

Online Reviews

Counter, Andrew J. *Inheritance in Nineteenth-Century French Culture: Wealth, Knowledge and the Family*. Oxford: Legenda, 2010. Pp. 205. ISBN: 978-1-906540-75-3

Sarah Bernthal, Brown University

Andrew J. Counter's *Inheritance in Nineteenth-Century French Culture* offers an original look at how tensions arising from the legislation of bequest reverberated across politics and fiction. Counter claims that intense debate about inheritance made this practice into a "master-metaphor" (11) through which nineteenth-century France conceptualized and contested notions of the family. His research into French law and the nascent science of sociology illuminates familiar authors—Balzac, Sand, Maupassant, Zola—in unexpected and exciting ways, showing how their seemingly straightforward narratives of bequest are fraught with multiple meanings and indicative of social strife. His book is impressive in its careful historical approach, the range of material it engages, and its perceptive readings on themes of testaments, greed, crime, family, and women's renunciation of property.

Nineteenth-century French literature, Counter argues, offers alternatives to patriarchal and patrilineal models of inheritance. Although conservative critics of the Civil Code nostalgically recalled an apocryphal golden age of primogeniture, their fiction-writing contemporaries were more interested in how inheritance diverged from the clichéd transmission "de père en fils" of property and identity. Counter examines depictions of inheritance involving adoption, adultery, the transmission of property to women, and family ties that are "collateral" (diverging from direct descent) or "centrifugal" (expanding outwards from the nuclear family). These untraditional family constellations blur the paradigm of the *paterfamilias* and complicate the scope of his authority. Such alternative notions of kinship, Counter asserts, privilege "elective" family ties based on taste and choice, thwarting the idea that one must follow in the father's footsteps.

In his introduction, Counter explains how inheritance law was rewritten during the French Revolution to ensure the dissemination of property. In 1793, the National Convention required estates to be divided equally among all legitimate and illegitimate children (and in their absence, collateral relations). The 1804 Civil Code subsequently "disavowed" illegitimacy, stating that "l'enfant conçu pendant le mariage, a pour père le mari" (125). It gave testators greater control of their estates, but still enjoined that each legitimate child inherit a significant portion of his or her parents' wealth. The controversies provoked by these reforms and their displacement into literature shape the following chapters.

Chapter one addresses the polemics of "patriarchal conservatism" (28) and its attack on the Civil Code. Counter focuses on Frédéric Le Play, an early sociologist who warned that by limiting the father's power to strike disobedient offspring from his will and to choose a unique heir, the Civil Code threatened the family's stability. Le Play's more pessimistic followers turned him into a prophet of national decline, predicting the *morcellement* of property into infinitesimally small fragments, and the annihilation of all enterprising initiative and "procreative instinct" (38).

Following Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's scholarship on avuncular figures and contingency within the family, Counter's second chapter studies the stock character of the *oncle à succession* (a long lost, wealthy bachelor and irregular source of wealth). A familiar figure in comic theater, the uncle constituted a "wildcard" (57) in the dynamics of bequest: the Civil Code allowed those who were both

childless and without surviving forebears to dispose of their property as they saw fit. A celibate and possibly queer presence, the literary uncle could also reactivate heteronormative family structures by pressuring his successors to marry.

The second part of Counter's book examines the ambivalent coexistence of these different currents of "family knowledge"—conservative and patriarchal, individualistic and avuncular—within works of fiction. A study of Balzac's *Ursule Mirouët* in chapter three shows paternalism at work in a nontraditional family: after his will is destroyed, a kindly adoptive father becomes a phantom tyrant. The resemblance between testamentary writing and "ghostly intervention" (22) is further developed in chapter four, which looks at adulterous bequests (to former lovers or their illegitimate children) in Maupassant's fiction. Counter argues that Maupassant portrays the will as a source of knowledge from beyond the grave and "beyond the social" (106) that must be disavowed (in the psychoanalytical sense of the term) if society is to remain intact. Counter's Lacanian reading asserts, somewhat problematically, that socially accepted opinions come "closest to the truth" (126), even if this "truth" has no basis in fact: revelation is always hypothetical, and the troubling disclosures of Maupassant's wills are disavowed before they can do any real damage.

The final chapters explore overlaps between inheritance and gift giving. In chapter five, we encounter the theme of disinheritance in several novels written by women. In addition to Sand's *Antonia*, Counter considers the *roman d'éducation*, a popular, sentimental, and religious genre that justified women's renunciation of property through their participation in a "higher, spiritual economy" (139) of generosity and resignation. Chapter six challenges the theory that Zola's *La Terre* merely echoes contemporary fears that the *donation entre vifs*, a successional practice in which living parents passed wealth to their children, encouraged parricide. Counter's assertion that *La Terre* delivers an "ethical" message emphasizing freedom and the "radical non-inevitability of any particular outcome" (182) seems to discount Zola's obsession with heredity, although the originality of this reading is refreshing. He concludes by tying together the notions of literary inheritance and the elective family: nineteenth-century authors, he argues, saw themselves as choosing their own literary predecessors and intertext.

Counter's interdisciplinary book illustrates that society cannot be understood through any single model of the family or type of "family knowledge." By emphasizing the fluidity and multiplicity of possible family bonds, both material and affective, Counter uncovers numerous ways in which the nineteenth century challenged, rejected, incorporated, displaced, and transformed the father—and perhaps more importantly, the uncle.

Nineteenth-Century French Studies 42, Nos. 3 & 4 Spring-Summer 2014
http://ncfs.unl.edu/reviews_online.php

© 2014 University of Nebraska–Lincoln
Questions & Comments, write to: <ncfsreviews@gmail.com>