

ography and criticism in a sophisticated way that almost makes them seem inseparable, to cite just two examples. More, though, it is strange to find a book lamenting what might be seen, with some qualification, as its own chief failing. Had Eisler listened to her own words here, steeped herself more thoroughly in the fine critical studies of Byron that have appeared in recent decades, read the poet's work more carefully and critically, and learned from the example of writers such as Walter Jackson Bate, this book might have become the major new critical biography of Byron we have been waiting for. Her research and writing skills are certainly up to the task of creating it. Again, whether the elements that would succeed at that task are missing because of Eisler's definition of popular literary biography and its audience, I do not know. As it stands, *Byron: Child of Passion, Fool of Fame* would make excellent reading for someone who, properly warned of the superficialities and errors in its comments on the poet's works, has been intrigued by Byron's life and character and wishes a rich, detailed, and generally reliable account of them. As literary criticism, even biographical literary criticism, though, it falls very short. Nonetheless, if it brings an audience to Byron that might not have been willing to find him in the more "scholarly" treatments of his life and works, it will have served the end it meets and, in all likelihood, the end it seeks.

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*Sentimental Materialism: Gender, Commodity Culture, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. By Lori Merish. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000. x + 389 pp. \$21.95.

Like Ann Douglas in *The Feminization of American Culture*, Lori Merish in *Sentimental Materialism* locates nineteenth-century sentimentality in the nexus of commodity consumption, but Merish productively complicates the relationships among American women, literary texts, and consumer goods. In a learned and theoretically charged reading comprising feminist, materialist, and new historicist readings of both familiar and lesser known texts, Merish illustrates the enduring influence of eighteenth-century Scottish moral philosophy with regard to women and consumption. In the Scottish model, "taste," with its civilizing, sensitizing influence, was the province of women and a route to social subjectivity, albeit not to full citizenship.

Although eventually incorporated into American culture, this Scottish model was challenged during the early Republic era; indeed, as re-

vealed in Hannah Foster's *The Coquette*, desire for luxury goods was a source of great political anxiety. Through her reading of this novel, Merish ably exposes the tangled relationship between patriarchal power and female taste: feminine taste, while linked to sentiment and sympathy, is enabled by male financial prerogatives and thus subject to masculine constraint. Without capital of her own, Eliza Wharton can gratify her economic desires only by marriage to a man of property. With this economic twist, Merish arrives at largely the same reading of *The Coquette* as does Cathy Davidson in *Revolution and the Word*—that *The Coquette* delimits the narrow field of choices available to young women during the early national era. As Merish puts it, these choices are “to be used or cared for by men: to be treated as sexual objects . . . or to be treated as feminine ‘subjects,’ and thus subjected to the regime of patriarchal domesticity and its norms of affectional discipline” (77).

Whereas in *The Coquette* feminine taste and desire for luxury render women subject to men, by the 1830s, Merish persuasively argues, luxury's stigma had dissipated, and in such texts as Caroline Kirkland's *A New Home, Who'll Follow?* we instead see a philosophy of “pious materialism,” in which luxury goods selected by women exert a civilizing, spiritualizing influence, refining the manners and aesthetic capabilities of men. In a reading of *A New Home* and Catharine Maria Sedgwick's *Home*, Merish claims that “the sentimental subject is produced and sustained by attachment to and caring for a limited, domestic world of goods” (116). She further suggests *A New Home* and other domestic treatments of frontier life modeled a way to socialize the lower classes and erase racial differences through refined, orderly, homogenous domestic environments, which ideally would create a more harmonious national “family.” Merish concludes that domesticity and the market are not antithetical, since fulfilling cultivated aesthetic tastes depended on the availability of abundant goods, just as the desire for such goods fueled market growth. What is problematic in these texts is speculative accumulation of land or capital that prevents one from putting to proper use the goods one already owns, a problem characterized as peculiarly masculine.

In a chapter on *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Blithedale Romance*, Merish treads much-broken ground, but her reading of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* allows us a fresh look at the racial problems of the novel. Merish would agree with those who charge Stowe with being patronizing of blacks, but for rather different reasons than those usually articulated. Rather than accusing Stowe of overt racism, Merish argues that Stowe attributes

full humanity to blacks only by animating them with aesthetic sensibility and “situating them within the sentimental bonds of domestic intimacy”—usually within a white family (156), a situation that “sustains white economic entitlement and asserts black dependency” (154). She concludes that “Sentimental discourse such as Stowe’s helped expand a *protective* rather than an *enabling* conception of rights and legal/political identity, and helped construct a semisecular model of caretaking and benevolent ownership that became codified in the liberal welfare state” (163).

Although *Sentimental Materialism* is interested primarily in the consumption of goods, rather than their production, two chapters examine black women’s labor and use of consumer goods. In Merish’s reading, sentimental narratives figure power and agency as the prerogatives of white men, yet these narratives recognize other means such as consumption of material goods through which individuals could gain access to subjectivity. For slave women, unable to own even themselves, this route to subjectivity generally was foreclosed. Yet sentimental narratives figure freedom not merely in terms of the physical body, but also in terms of feelings and emotions: “In sentimental texts . . . an individual’s body can be sold, but his or her feelings—his or her (sentimental) person—can never be purchased or nonconsensually owned; it is in that sense that the sentimental subject is imagined and can imagine herself as existentially ‘free’” (198). Thus in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, we see Linda Brent asserting her subjectivity by resisting Dr. Flint’s attentions and giving her affection to another white man. Yet even when Brent is freed with the assistance of the Bruce family, Merish suggests this freedom is rather like a sentimental marriage in that it “entails a voluntary, heartfelt commitment to share a happy home with a ‘master’ who is also a ‘friend’” and therefore entitled to her labor (215).

Merish next examines the role of fashion for black women in the wake of Emancipation. Consumption throughout much of the nineteenth century was framed in literary texts and advertisements as a white privilege. But in the post-Civil War era, African American women, denied political representation and full participation in public life, used dress to signal ownership of their bodies; fashion enabled them to figure in the public sphere by asserting feminine subjectivity and gentility denied them by slavery. In *Behind the Scenes: or, Thirty Years a Slave, and Four Years in the White House*, Elizabeth Keckley, who earned her own freedom through her seamstress skills and who later sewed for Presi-

dent and Mary Todd Lincoln, as well as Jefferson Davis, makes visible slave women's labor in creating fashion. And in describing her relationship with Mary Todd Lincoln, Keckley's narrative, like that of Jacobs, suggests that relationships between white and freed black women continued to be fraught with a sense of entitlement on the part of white women with regard to black women's labor and affections.

Slave women were not the only laborers who toiled in the name of fashion, of course; the white female mill workers of New England (initially WASPs, but by 1860, largely immigrants, especially Irish) wove the very fabric of fashion. While Merish acknowledges that working class white women aspired to fashionable dress for similar reasons, readings of texts written by these women, especially the later issues of the *Lowell Offering*, which sought to make culturally visible their labor, might offer a more complicated or counternarrative of the production and consumption of fashion by white women of differing classes.

The final chapter of *Sentimental Materialism* moves from female to male consumption and discusses the cigar as a sign of imperial manhood that, in the wake of the Spanish-American War, crossed class lines. Framing the chapter with brief discussions of Martin Delany's *Blake* and focusing on cigar advertisements and political cartoons, Merish argues that the cigar figured both as a masculine Anglo-American commodity and a phallic symbol of Afro-Cuban labor, similar to how dress-making figured as a sign of black women's labor.

While *Sentimental Materialism* in places covers familiar territory, what is fresh about Merish's book is her effort to show the evolution of consumer culture from the contested American adoption of Scottish moral philosophy through the end of the nineteenth century and how this evolution is both registered in and promoted by sentimental texts. I wished at times that Merish had pushed the boundaries of consumption: what happens when women possess a superfluity of goods? Rather than an Eliza Wharton, who merely desires luxury, how do we understand a Marie St. Clare, surrounded by material wealth, which, rather than enhancing her spirituality, seems further to erode it? And by the end of the nineteenth century, had the enabling relationship among men, power, and female subjectivity turned full circle? Is Edith Wharton's Lily Bart merely an updated Eliza Wharton? Despite these questions, *Sentimental Materialism* makes a valuable contribution to the field of American studies.