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Book of Altered Love

The Far Side of a Kiss.

By Anne Haverty.

Chatto & Windus.

241pp, £12.99 in UK

“She defied any one to read her thoughts, she once told me. ‘Do they then require concealing?’ I imprudently asked her. The command over herself is surprising. She never once betrays herself by any momentary forgetfulness, by any appearance of triumph or superiority to the person who is her dupe ... it is one faultless, undeviating, consistent, consummate piece of acting.” Thus William Hazlitt in his *Liber Amoris* (1823), one of the most notorious and bizarre works of romance in the history of literature. The “she” of this short hotchpot of a book is one Sarah Walker (1800-1878) whom Hazlitt first met on 16 August 1820 when she, as daughter and waiting-girl of the London boarding house to which he had just moved, took his morning tea up to his rooms and paused before exiting for a fateful eyes-across-the-room moment. There ensued an unconsummated but nonetheless intense—at least on Hazlitt’s behalf—two-year love affair during which Sarah became for Hazlitt a peculiar combination of Dulcinea and Infelice: As recorded in his book of love, she was now an “angel of light” and “charmer”, now “a little artful vixen” and “Precious little dissembler”.

While Hazlitt is currently enjoying renewed critical attention, the jury is still out on whether *Liber Amoris* is mainly cathartic or vengeful, a love letter, couched in parody, to a young woman who jilted an older man (Hazlitt was then in his mid-forties), or a standard confessional idealisation of a woman (the book is subtitled *The New Pygmalion*) that lapses into unusually intense high-Romantic dudgeon. Either way, the book caused immediate scandal on publication. While Hazlitt was reasonably equipped to endure this as he generally courted chaos in his personal life and knew that he could expect no favours from his conservative enemies, Sarah suffered considerable social obloquy after she was eventually named in the press. The combined incriminations of this woman by Hazlitt and then by the puritanical English public of the time, resulted in a received idea of her as below-stairs coquette that has not generally been creatively re-examined.

Until now. Author of one of the most accomplished first novels of recent years, *One Day as a Tiger* (1997), Anne Haverty gives in her second novel a voice to Sarah Walker who, as the narrator of *The Far Side of a Kiss*, finally tells the *Liber Amoris* story from her own perspective. This kind of project, where a previously obscure real-life or fictionalised woman (Sarah qualifies on both counts) is reconstructed, is always a worthy one but it works artistically in only a few cases, such as Jean Rhys’s exemplary *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). The problem is how a contemporary research-informed voice can be controlled in order to fit the mouth of a less aware, less educated character. The feminist curing of historical women’s silence must, at least in literary work, *sound* authentic if it is to convince.

Haverty’s finely crafted first paragraph signals a careful and sustained blending of an articulacy that reflects Sarah Walker’s home learning, with a colloquial indignation that reflects her social situation: “He has put me in a book. He had but a frail steel nib for his weapon but he has destroyed me by it as clean as if he used a blade and

impaled me on its point.... There was a time when he called me his queen and by other fancy titles—and next I am become no more than a juicy bone for him to throw to the scribblers in the newspapers for a right good chew.” Writing now a year after disgrace, and progressing in short chapters, Sarah tells of her transformation from “lodging-house drudge” to a position where this famous man of letters claims her as his muse, obtains a divorce in the hope that she will marry him, and thrashes around in what she dismisses as “love-sickness”. In the process, she is surrounded by an array of convincing characters, particularly in the forms of her ultra-phlegmatic mother and her eventual life partner, Mr Tompkins.

Though Haverty occasionally allows Sarah a little too much diatribe of the “there is a great deal for a girl to put up with” variety (“It may please you to speak like a Woolly...”, her sister Martha scolds), the narrative is highly distilled; its pace rarely slackens and even the potentially tedious detail of the daily upstairs-downstairs round is rendered with a chatty flair. Haverty patently knows that when writing this kind of book, history is what novelists should learn in order to forget it: While there are close correspondences with factualities, from Hazlitt’s massive tea intake and consummate racket-playing to mention of Napoleon, Byron, Wordsworth and Hazlitt’s friends Lamb and P.G. Patmore, early nineteenth-century London sits around Sarah as easily as unremarked air. Most importantly, Hazlitt, while he is in a way the target of the book, appears as real as Sarah herself, even when throwing his unbosoming wobbles, and Haverty’s admirable sense of balance is reflected in her choice of a plangent rather than bilious passage from his work as epigraph.

Sarah Walker’s overall function, in Haverty’s manifestation, is to perform as de-idealising, humanising force. She is appreciably flirtatious and reserved by turns and is thoroughly creditable in her self-justifications. Her great success as a character is to point up, with occasional dry wit, Romantic man’s melancholia and notional aristocracy for the faintly ludicrous posturings they were. At the very end of *Liber Amoris*, Hazlitt was petulantly resigned: “I am afraid she will soon grow common to my imagination, as well as worthless in herself.” *The Far Side of a Kiss* is a remarkable reversal of this dismissal through a demonstration of what literature is truly for—the exercise of the empathetic imagination. It is a consummate piece of acting.

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