

AFRICAN LITERATURE IN ENGLISH. EAST AND WEST

Gareth Griffiths

Longman Literature in English Series. Harlow: Pearson Education, 2000.

(by Klaus Stierstorfer, University of Duesseldorf, Germany)

The "Longman Literature in English Series", edited by David Carroll, Michael Wheeler and Chris Walsh, has developed into one of the most useful resources in the field of anglophone literature for researchers, teachers and students alike. For the first, they provide a valuable work of reference, for the second a great help in deciding how to go about structuring and arranging the material under consideration, and for the latter, these volumes are a most welcome and profound introduction and survey of practically all aspects of literatures in the English language on which students may be asked to write a paper or prepare for an examination. Orientation for all kinds of readers is greatly facilitated by the series convention of an appended chronological table which does not only list the literary data described in the main text, but also gives a context of major historical and cultural events. The short bio-bibliographies of the major writers discussed in the book are equally handy, as are the well-structured, briefly commented bibliographies and the luxury of diligently compiled indices. Between them, the volumes of this series offer one of the most powerful and comprehensive accounts of anglophone literature and culture currently to be found on the international market. The approach, discernible as an overall editorial policy, of cultural and historical contextualization as well as the consideration of what are often so misleadingly called the "New English Literatures", mainly from areas formerly under British colonial rule or influence, render the series conceptually up to date

and very topical. Not many complaints can be filed against this grand design, and in fact only two seem at all noteworthy. One of them is the uncertain availability of the volumes, the earlier of which may already have gone out of print while many of the scheduled ones are still forthcoming. Although readers are updated on the progress in the series survey given at the beginning of all its volumes, more effort on the publisher's side (now incorporated with Pearson Education) could be invested on the timely reprinting and, where necessary, updating or re-editing of earlier volumes. A second problem is, of course, the rather steep price even of the paperback editions; a range between 35€ and 40€ puts the series as a whole beyond the reach of the ordinary student budget and causes a painful drawing of breath among all but the best-paid scholars and teachers.

This introductory on the series as a whole in a review on an individual volume seems justified, as the book under discussion here, Gareth Griffiths' *African Literatures East and West*, partakes of all these series advantages (as well as, unfortunately, sharing the pricing problem), and that to a particularly high degree. The volume comes as a timely complement to Michael Chapman's likewise excellent *Southern African Literatures*, so that, between them, the two books cover all anglophone literatures in Africa in their survey, with the southern borders of Tanzania and Zaire as the dividing line. Bookshelf aestheticians will complain about the change of book format, as the more recent volume has grown in size by about two centimetres each way, but, with about the same amount of text, ends up with a slimmer spine. Dedicated margin scribblers (reviewers among them) will protest against the shortage of blank space on the pages which are, now more than ever, filled with text to an extent which is on the verge of suggesting that the publishers have been skimping on paper. As it is, brimming with information may still be the reader's more favourable impression, and brimming it is when one turns to look at what Griffiths has to communicate in terms of material content.

Gareth Griffiths, of *The Empire Writes Back*-fame, is —perhaps less famously but not less expertly so— an old hand when it comes to studies in African literatures in English. In his pioneering *A Double Exile: African and West Indian Writing Between Two Cultures* (London: Boyars, 1978) he had drawn attention to the parallels and connections between African and Caribbean writing, and he has ever since issued a more or less continual stream of critical writings on African subjects, most recently about the part played by publishers and publishing opportunities in shaping literary productions issuing from African countries. In the Longman volume, however, Griffiths' expert management of a great number of sometimes very heterogeneous texts from vast stretches of geographic space and a time span from the late 18th century, when the first English-language texts in Africa appear, right up to the present time is particularly noteworthy. Indeed, for all the other virtues of this book, it is perhaps its most remarkable achievement to present,

despite the quantity of texts and ground covered, an even mixture of survey and local analysis. While the great developments and far-reaching movements in African literary history and culture always remain in clear view, the volume's story is never reduced to sweeping statements and simplistic categorization, but continually refocuses and zooms in on the individual, the local, the specific and the marginal or counterfactual. This feature is already patent in the overall division of the volume. Part One deals with "Patronages and the development of East and West African Writing", Part Two is a discussion of "Dominant Themes and Patterns", while Part Three introduces "Alternative Voices". Each of the three parts offers highly original interpretations of the material in question. Thus, the first part sets out to illustrate how, on the one hand, all-informing patterns of patronage have remained in place from the early slave narratives to the present, with different patrons, from the missionary presses through the colonial literary bureaux right up to the big international publishing houses such as the all-important Heinemann African Writers series, retaining a hold on the shape of the texts put in print. On the other hand, it also strives to illustrate, how, despite these strong forces of homogenization, crippling as they can become to creative talents, writers all over East and West Africa have also been able to see these publishing outlets as an opportunity and to find highly original ways and means to express their local agenda and their idiosyncratic views. Thus, when Olaudah Equiano used the common European form of an autobiography to shape the slave narrative of his *Life* (1789) and thus find a form of expression readily recognizable to European readers, his writing is shown by Griffiths (12f) to constitute an appropriation of this generic convention, and thereby subverting the current European view of the slave as sub-human. Thus, Griffiths repeatedly argues on what one may call a cultural materialist basis, the great patrons throughout Africa's publishing history did not only have a homogenizing and manipulative function; their activities did not, as Griffiths succinctly puts it, "result in a simple or absolute censorship, but provided extensive opportunities for independent and even subversive expression" (84).

An equally differentiated impression is conveyed in the second part when the dominant themes of African writings are discussed. Again, an overall pattern is established in the division between an older generation of writers, such as Chinua Achebe or Ngugi wa Thiong'o who thematized the clash of cultures with the arrival of modernism in Africa, and a younger generation of authors seen to emerge in the 1970s, who levelled their critique against the corruption and inadequacy of post-independence regimes, sometimes castigating their predecessors for a lack of social and political directness and commitment in their works. Typically, Griffiths then goes on to deconstruct such neat historical schemes, as he sums it up at one point: "All such categories reflect a critical desire for neatness and taxonomic clarity,

which a detailed examination of the practice of particular writers continually frustrates" (182).

Griffiths' clear perspective on the complexity of the literary developments he depicts is particularly highlighted in the conception of the volume's final part presenting three different groups of minority or alternative voices which do not fit the major traits of African writing as described in the previous chapters. The first group is a small but occasionally highly conspicuous number of authors from non-anglophone countries in East and West Africa with such illustrious figures as the Somalian novelist Nuruddin Farah or the Sudanese poet Taban Lo Liyong among them. Another kind of alterity is then discussed in a chapter on African female writers who very frequently offer perspectives which fundamentally differ from the "mainstream" male traditions, irrespective of generation gaps and changes. Flora Nwapa and Grace Ogot, prominent names in the 1960s, here stand side by side with more recent writers such as the Ghanaians Ama Ata Aidoo and Efiua Sutherland, and, most famously, Buchi Emecheta. The last chapter finally looks at writers who have adopted a more global and international approach, such as the London-born Jamal Mahjoub, whose father is Sudanese, or the Tanzanian Abdulrazak Gurnah, Sierra Leonian Lemuel Johnson and, most famously of course, Nigerian Ben Okri. Especially with writers of such multicultural backgrounds as M.G. Vassanji, Griffiths argues (319ff), it becomes difficult to find convincing criteria on the basis of which to assign them wholeheartedly to the African domain, while they themselves may live elsewhere or write about subjects and use settings of a global variety. This is, in fact, one of the few guesses which Griffiths ultimately ventures to make about the future for English in Africa that, next to an increasing importance of indigenous African languages, there will be "an increasing separation between those writers whose work is either aimed at or promoted by the international publishing networks, and those who seek to address a local audience and to promote a viable local publishing industry" (334).

Clearly, here is a multi-purpose volume where in-depth discussions to the highest critical standards of major literary works are found besides and intimately integrated into an overall agenda of great historical sophistication and cultural sensitivity. The book is eminently readable throughout; only very occasionally does Griffiths' prose become somewhat ponderous and his argumentation can show some redundancies, but these rhetorical features are clearly functionalized within his overall emphasis on balanced judgments, his great circumspection to give a hearing to all sides of a question, and his fine sensibility where cultural and political controversies are concerned. Griffiths' rendering of this area of African writing in English has undoubtedly set a standard for a long time to come.

PARADIGMS FOUND: FEMINIST, GAY, AND NEW HISTORICIST READINGS OF SHAKESPEARE

Pilar Hidalgo

Amsterdam, Atlanta, GA.: Rodopi, 2001.

(by Celestino Deleyto. University of Zaragoza)

One of the practical ironies confronting the student of Shakespeare in the last two decades or so is that, while her original reason to undertake the analysis of Shakespeare's works may have probably been the powerful attraction of plays and poems, she will find herself spending most of her time trying to keep abreast with theoretical and critical developments in the huge and ever growing scholarship on the subject and with little time left to pursue what she initially thought was going to be the object of her study, namely the texts themselves. This proliferation of published research on the English playwright, which, by the way, is paralleled outside the academy by the recent boom of the "Shakespeare industry", has made the subject often forbidding and has persuaded many young scholars to turn their attention to other, less attractive fields. Pilar Hidalgo's book is a brave attempt to confront this problem and, if only for this reason, it will be welcomed by students and experts alike.

Aware from the outset of the difficulty of the project of systematising and giving some sort of coherence to the whole of contemporary Shakespeare criticism, the author restricts her field to Anglo-American criticism and to what in her view have been its two most important and influential tendencies: feminism and new historicism. Not only is it difficult to disagree with her choice but this selection proves on inspection to be an astute one since the reader soon realises that these two paradigms allow the author to cover a lot more ground than had originally