

Halpern, Faye. *Sentimental Readers: The Rise and Fall of a Disparaged Rhetoric*. Pp. 240. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2013. US\$45.00 (paperback) ISBN: 9781609381868.

Review by Angela Toscano

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Faye Halpern's monograph, *Sentimental Readers: The Rise and Fall of a Disparaged Rhetoric*, re-examines sentimentality and the sentimental novels of nineteenth-century America. This re-examination structures sentimentality not as an affect, but as a rhetoric. It is an attempt by Halpern to articulate what sentimentality is, rather than how it makes a reader feel. She says,

“Rather than employing the term ‘sentimentality,’ I use the term ‘sentimental rhetoric’ throughout this book. Viewing sentimentality as a kind of rhetoric allows us to think of it as a set of textual strategies—including a way of structuring a particular relationship between text and reader—that popular mid-century women writers developed to persuade readers of their worldview” (xvi).

Furthermore, by situating sentimentality as a rhetoric, Halpern places nineteenth-century sentimental novels in a larger context and conversation about novelistic endeavors of the period. This move sees American women authors of the nineteenth century as participating and “enmeshed in the public, male world of rhetoric and oratory” (xvi), and their use of sentimental rhetoric as a persuasive strategy, in part, responding to concerns about disingenuous rhetoric.

Halpern, though, goes beyond merely resituating sentimentality in the larger historical context of American arts and letters. She does not wish to look only at “the rise and fall of nineteenth-century sentimental rhetoric” (xvii), but rather to show how sentimental rhetoric is still relevant in our contemporary approaches to reading. Sentimental rhetoric “can illuminate how our account of what we do as literary critics and how we teach critical reading to our students does not always match what we actually do. An examination of sentimental rhetoric can lead the way to a more self-aware practice” (xviii).

The first two chapters, therefore, may be of especial interest to those scholars with a background and an interest in nineteenth-century American literature. Halpern begins by

discussing Edward Tyrel Channing as an example of an American orator and rhetorician contending with the problem of disingenuous rhetoric—the fear that a man may persuade the audience of an untruth because of the force of his style and pathos—and his inability to successfully do so. The second chapter explores how Harriet Beecher Stowe succeeds where Channing failed by making learning and ignorance in her speaker a sign of their truthfulness, creating texts that “deny their own textuality and want to be seen as oratorical productions rather than written ones” (xix). Halpern presents a careful study and close-reading of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, demonstrating the way that Stowe not only employs oratory but the visual to make the story persuasive to its audience. “Stowe’s characters learn to read words as pictures that attest to ‘the mute appeal’ of the orator. Her intended audience is to do the same. To be moved by *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* is to show how you have learned this lesson, how you have become a different sort of reader: an antiliterate one” (62).

The third and fourth chapters explore the decline of sentimentality towards the end of the nineteenth century. Looking at Louisa May Alcott and the work of Francois Delsarte, Halpern argues that “sentimentality’s loss of power around this time is caused by Delsartism” (82) because Delsarte argued that gesture produces emotion. If emotion stems not from a spontaneous outpouring but rather the inverse, then the power of sentimental rhetoric is weakened as its gestures become suspect of being artificial and inauthentic. “Delsartism seemed able to justify ‘sentimental behavioralism,’ until the self-conscious craft it enjoined its followers to embrace undermined its promise to merge seeming and being” (82). Where sentimental gesture was once the sign of veracity, it now lacks the guarantee of authenticity that Harriet Beecher Stowe gave it. Halpern argues in her fourth chapter that this undermining is further solidified by the trial of Henry Ward Beecher, whose reputation and popularity hinged on his ability to perform sentimental rhetoric, that genuine outpouring of emotion expected of an orator. His trial, however, “reproduces in miniature all the doubts that sentimental rhetoric as a method of persuasion would inspire in a large number of its future audience” (85). In so doing, Beecher’s trial is emblematic of the growing suspicion and mistrust readers and listeners had towards the sentimental. This mistrust would characterize later approaches to nineteenth-century sentimental fiction.

While fascinating, the focus of Halpern’s first four chapters is the historical rise and decline of sentimental rhetoric in nineteenth-century American literature and rhetoric. As such, they are not necessarily relevant to scholars who study popular fiction more broadly and transhistorically, or to those whose specialties lie outside of the United States and the nineteenth century. Where Halpern’s work on sentimental rhetoric bears the most fruit for the field of popular romance studies is in her final two chapters.

In the penultimate chapter, Halpern explores “how much our own reading practices have changed from those of the ideal nineteenth-century reader of sentimental rhetoric” (111). Here, she attempts to apply a lesson from sentimental rhetoric to the pedagogical practices of teaching English literature by defending bad reading. Bad reading, in Halpern’s definition, is reading to identify with the characters as well as the “common sense lessons that they,” meaning students, “already believe in” (112). In contrast to critiques of sentimental rhetoric and reading for identification that see it as apolitical and superficial, Halpern argues that identification as a reading practice has merit for reasons “that are precisely political,” and her goal is “to show how it might be crucial, in fact, for taking a stance against racial injustice” (118). Her argument centers around the way texts position the reader to read, whether ironically or sincerely, by examining *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and

Melville's "Benito Cereno." Both, she contends, operate on reader identification. The difference is Stowe's novel is more straightforward, whereas Melville's novella "exists as a negative force, critiquing not just these theories" of racial essentialism "but the transparency that a novel like *Uncle Tom's Cabin* offers" (128). Still, it is a novella that "reveals that a reliance on unending interpretation as an antidote to racial oppression is no solution either. We must be able to identify if we want to take a political stand" (128).

Identification, as a reading practice and habit, has haunted critical conversations of popular romance. Romance readers, like readers of sentimental fiction, are often accused of uncritical reading, of over-identifying with characters and ideologies. What Halpern argues, though, promises an interesting framework for reconsidering the role of identification in reading practices generally. She suggests that identification connects the expert with the student, since both participate in different degrees of this identification. As such, acknowledging identification as a reading tactic bridges the gap between the two. Moreover, it admits that reading has stakes, that it is not merely an intellectual exercise whose goal is to unmask the hidden meaning of a text. Rather, it is a position that recognizes that the manners in which critics read—politically, historically, etc.—are ones that enable critics to still find "something in the text that resonates with their beliefs" (136). The inference, then, is that identification permits both student and teacher to openly engage with texts in ethical and meaningful ways that do not reduce them to either artefact or game.

This argument is picked up in the final chapter, in which Halpern looks at the "varied responses that sentimental novels evoked" in both her own reading and as a way to acknowledge that readers who are affected by emotions other than suspicion deserve more credit than has been given to them (138). In her exploration, Halpern carefully outlines the ways in which critics have seen the sentimental as a trick, as an excessive habit, and as an act of complicity. Halpern concludes that it is "hard to read sentimental literature *as a critic* if we want to experience its emotional power fully or even if we want to understand how that power ever worked on other readers" (154). Indeed, a similar assertion could be made about critics of romance. To read sentimental rhetoric, Halpern suggests, requires that we read without critical distance, but in so doing we risk participating in the text in a way that "threatens to disqualify us as critics" (155). How is this tension to be resolved? She concludes by suggesting that in acknowledging to ourselves and our students that we all contain a multitude of reading selves, we might begin a discussion with our students about the distance between "how a text wants to be read" and "how we are trained to read it" (158).

Sentimental Readers offers a reconsideration not only of what sentimental rhetoric is and does, but how to teach it and think through it in the classroom. This later exploration is, in my opinion, the most fruitful of Halpern's arguments, and the one that I would argue is most applicable to approaches to popular romance, especially to discussions of how to teach it at an undergraduate level.