

Mapping the Unmapped Territories of Female Resistance

X Marks the Spot: Women Writers Map the Empire for British Children, 1790-1895. Megan A. Norcia. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010. 260 pp.

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Megan A. Norcia's *X Marks the Spot* looks at a genre that flagrantly applauds yet faintly critiques the patriarchal politics of British imperialism. She turns our attention to geography primers, a form largely ignored in current literary scholarship, and points out an intriguing contradiction: these primers were mainly written by women who never visited the foreign lands that they sought to map for young readers. Rather "they cobbled together the accounts of male travelers and explorers, rendering these accounts accessible and educational for child audiences" (14). Indeed, even the primer writers who are known to have journeyed outside England foreground their role as mother at home rather than traveler abroad. Norcia's driving question throughout her study is whether, and to what extent, these female authors register an awareness of and a frustration with their marginality in the imperial enterprise. She answers that, on the one hand, the primers blithely perform British military and moral superiority, but on the other hand, she locates within these texts "moments of disruption" (22) where the primer writers find fault with their limited mobility, partially identify with disenfranchised, non-British others, and critique the exportation of domestic hierarchies to foreign lands. Norcia does not try to turn her writers into outspoken feminists; rather, she readily admits their complicity in the British imperial project and often in the perpetuation of their status as second-class citizens within the Empire. Her study is a well-researched, disciplined, and frank tracing of the primer writers' subtle — but nonetheless marked — resistance to the imperialist narrative of masculine, British power within the very genre that sought to package it so prettily for child readers.

Unearthing its long-buried literary treasures, *X Marks the Spot* joins similarly recuperative projects by Mitzi Myers, Norma Clarke, Barbara Gates, Bernard Lightman, and others. These critics, Norcia among them, show that, though many academic and political domains were closed to eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women, the genre of children's literature provided a place where talented female writers could find expression and where they could obliquely critique the male institutions that excluded them. Modern scholars of women's writing will be impressed with the range of writers Norcia so fluidly discusses: Priscilla Wakefield, Favell Lee Mortimer, Barbara Hofland, Mary Anne Venning, Charlotte Yonge, and Anne Keary, to give only a partial list. Norcia is invested not merely in these writers' sly manipulation of a seemingly benign genre

but also in the political potential of the genre itself. Children's literature, despite its marginality in the academy, is central to the dissemination of ideology and the formation of culture. Norcia rightly claims that the geography primers that she analyzes would have laid the groundwork for how nineteenth-century readers came to envision the Empire and its occupants, and how male and female readers began to interpret their very different global positions. "To live figuratively in the space of the nineteenth century," Norcia writes, "means understanding the political, social, and imperial forces that were brought to bear on the writers who produced imperial discourse in the primers, as well as the young subjects who read and struggled to assimilate these teachings" (29). Recovering these women writers' voices and speculating about young readers' experiences, Norcia brings the nineteenth century more vividly into focus.

<3>In this four-chapter study, each of the first two chapters explores a common trope through which women writers imparted ideas about Empire to young readers. The first of these is "The Dysfunctional 'Family of Man,'" whereby European conflict is rendered as sibling rivalry, colonies appear as unruly children, and England is seated as the presiding parent. In Hofland's *Panorama of Europe: A New Game of Geography* (1813), a group of British children devise a game in which each plays the part of a European nation; they bicker over who gets to be England until their father appoints their mother to the coveted role. Norcia argues that this familiar trope of parent-England consolidates Britain's patriarchal power and, at the same time, "offers [Hofland] an opportunity to craft a vision of female authority on an imperial stage" (48). The inclusion of gender differences turns national and racial binaries into a much more complicated matrix. Chapter Two focuses on "The Imperial Dinner Party," a similarly domestic trope that allows England to play the provider of sustenance for the global community. Mortimer's *Near Home: or, The Countries of Europe Described* (1849) stages a banquet in which the host England supplies the main dish (a roast) while other nations bring lesser condiments and side dishes. Norcia intriguingly situates this trope within the symbolic roles of appetite and etiquette in contemporary discussions of child-rearing, national identity, and taste. The pervasiveness of the imperial dinner party in geography primers, she claims, shows the doggedness of the "prevailing belief that national character began with the breakfast table and ended in the stomach" (67). Children learned to map their world through the old adage that what you ate was, indeed, what you were.

<4>The two final chapters depart from assessing the dominant tropes that gave women a symbolic role within representations of Empire and turn instead to exposing the "moments of disruption" in which the primers' authors protested their actual role. The third chapter, "Terra Incognita," showcases episodes from a varied array of texts that feature thwarted mothers dissatisfied that their sons can travel where they cannot and narrators ambivalent about gendered itineraries when women do travel. The narrator of the anonymously-penned *Geography in Easy Dialogues, for Young Children, by A Lady* (1816) explicitly points to her all-consuming mothering duties as the reason that she has been unable to visit the lands she describes. Wakefield's *A Family Tour through the British Empire* (1804) does include mothers and daughters, but while the boys are free to explore caves and to climb mountains, the girls are restricted to nearby cottages. Norcia thus demonstrates that these women authors — even, or perhaps especially, those most enthusiastic about empire — intermittently express frustration in having to construct their second-hand narratives from the records of more mobile male travelers.

<5>Their role as retellers and editors, however, could also be an empowering one, and Norcia's fourth chapter argues that the primer writers upended the male-oriented metaphor of the colonial space as a blank, ready for European inscription, and instead employed the model of the palimpsest where multiple competing voices coexist. Rather than privileging the European experience, primers written by women contain accounts of the native inhabitants' alarm at the arrival of invading foreigners, disdain for European customs, and even disgust at the trespassers' whiteness. Here, however, Norcia might overstate the resistance manifest in the primers. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's arguments about "thirdspace" in *The Production of Space* (1991), she claims that authors like Mortimer, Meredith Jones, and Annie Wright Marston offer their readers something akin to the "'directly lived' knowledge and experience" (151) of non-Europeans. Norcia reads the inclusion of stories about missionaries who fail to convert natives and about natives who laugh in the faces of Europeans as alternatives to Western hegemony, even as she recognizes how these moments were both already textually mediated and easily recuperated to reinforce imperialist narratives. Registering such opposition to colonial pressures does not necessarily imply identification by the one who records it or impart sympathy to those who read it.

<6>On the whole, Norcia is careful not to make her claims larger than the texts she investigates can substantiate, and in avoiding that trap, she offers a refreshingly nuanced study of a genre that both disseminated the tropes and values of nineteenth-century imperialist discourse to an impressionable audience and, more quietly, chipped away at the authority of that same discourse to tell the whole story. Norcia shows how children's literature is, as she quotes J.S. Bratton, "a vehicle for ideology" (18), and especially for ideas about empire, race, and gender. But she also shows that, when eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women drivers took the wheel of this "vehicle," they did not always follow the sanctioned route. Her study points out the road bumps and side trips that gesture to a vast unmapped territory of female resistance. "If even these women's texts are vulnerable to moments of critical instability," Norcia writes, asking us to speculate with her, "then it may cause us to rethink the terra incognita of nineteenth-century womanhood" (143). *X Marks the Spot* encourages its readers to track the journeys that women writers imaginatively took into the foreign spaces of an expanding Empire, and it provocatively points the way for us to follow.