

Letter to the Editors in Response to Deborah L. Madsen's "Narratives of the Visto"

Brooke Horvath

Remembering that any publicity is better than no publicity, I should perhaps let Deborah Madsen's review of *Pynchon and Mason & Dixon* ("Narratives of the Visto," *Pynchon Notes* 46–49 [2000–2001]) pass without comment, especially given the time that has elapsed since both the book and the review appeared. But having just seen the review, I would like to respond to a few unfortunate assumptions made by Professor Madsen. Perhaps nobody cares, but it will make me feel better.

First, Professor Madsen laments the absence of any female voices: "Of the thirteen pieces in *Pynchon and Mason & Dixon* . . . not one is written by a woman. Of them all, not one addresses the issue of gender in the novel. I wonder why that is?" Professor Madsen of course has no way of knowing why that is, but she seems to think she does, attributing the absence of "women scholars" to "weaknesses of editorial judgement."

Her implication would seem to be that my co-editor, Irving Malin, and I either had no interest in hearing what a woman had to say or were blind to the fact that ours was an all-male line-up. Such, however, was not the case: we were aware of this fact and regretted it. Although I have long ago tossed the files related to this project and cannot therefore offer an exact number, I in fact contacted at least twenty women whose work led me to believe they might have had interesting things to say about Pynchon's novel. For one reason or another, all declined (as did other scholars contacted).

Certainly I might have tried harder and longer to find a female contributor; but, silly as it may sound in retrospect, there was at the time a desire on the part of everyone involved in this project to see the book completed and published as soon as possible; indeed, the deadlines we were pushing were one reason some people declined to participate. Because all potential contributors could not be contacted simultaneously lest they all agree to contribute and the book grow overlong, after the initial batch of sixteen or so letters (which included letters to several female academics), people were contacted in twos and threes. This process took a lot of time, and eventually it was felt that we had to proceed with the contributors we had—a group that, as

I imagine most of your readers would agree, was impressive apart from the matter of gender equity.

A second, more curious assumption Professor Madsen makes is that any woman contributing to the collection would have necessarily said the sorts of things about gender she found missing from our collection. Is this so? Would *any* woman writing about Pynchon have inevitably focused on "women and gender and sexuality"? Are female academics that predictable? Have they no other literary interests? Had I voiced such an assumption, would I not be guilty of sexual stereotyping? Is Professor Madsen guilty of stereotyping?

Perhaps this assumption about who, ideally, should have written on what topics relates to a second complaint Professor Madsen makes about our collection: that the essays sometimes echo one another, that they comprise "a consensus view" that leaves *Mason & Dixon* looking "too much like Pynchon's earlier works." Again, this was something I noticed as the essays arrived and which I observed in the book's introduction. Professor Madsen's assumption here seems to be that topics were assigned (she closes her review by noting that the book "highlight[s] the aspects of the text that are important to the editors"). But topics were in fact not assigned, as contributor and *Pynchon Notes* co-editor Bernard Duyfhuizen can attest. In fact, contributors were not even encouraged to cut particular paths through the novel.

Perhaps Professor Malin and I should have assigned topics to force variety, to encourage the unexpected and to avoid placing *Mason & Dixon* too readily into the context in which many readers have come to understand Pynchon. What we wished instead was to see what a gathering of excellent critics, familiar with Pynchon's earlier work and with contemporary fiction more generally, would make of this newest novel. That our contributors 1) saw sometimes similar things (often citing the same passages), 2) shared assumptions and reading strategies, and 3) interpreted Pynchon's fifth novel using what they had learned from his previous four seems to me interesting for what such shared concerns, perspectives and strategies reveal about interpretive communities, about how a difficult writer such as Pynchon comes to be understood and about how a writer's worth and meaning come gradually into view and over the course of a career deepen, alter and extend themselves.

When contributors of the caliber of David Seed, Brian McHale, Donald Greiner and the rest agreed to share their views on this long and complicated novel, we wished simply to see what, given a free hand, they would say. The effect of this first book-length foray into *Mason & Dixon* was, according to Professor Madsen, to find oneself "left with the comforting impression of having come to terms with the novel, of

seeing how it fits into a developing pattern of Pynchon's work and yet appreciating how this novel is distinct in itself." This is not a bad day's work, although I confess I have little desire to make anyone comfortable with Pynchon.

None of these explanations, of course, makes the book better than it is or erases its faults. Had we been able to include everyone we wanted (and felt we could dictate what got said), *Pynchon and Mason & Dixon* would doubtless have turned out closer to the ideal book we first imagined.

—*Kent State University*