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Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies, Volume 5, Number 1,
Spring/Summer 2005, pp. 99-111 (Review)

Published by University of Pennsylvania Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jem.2005.0007>



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REVIEW ARTICLE

Writing the Lives of Women: Recent Biographies of Eighteenth-Century Women Writers



KATHRYN R. KING

ANNIBEL JENKINS, *I'll Tell You What: The Life of Elizabeth Inchbald*.
Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2003. 596 pp. \$39.95.

LYNDA M. THOMPSON, *The "Scandalous Memoirists":
Constantia Phillips, Laetitia Pilkington and the shame of "publick fame."*
Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000. 243 pp. \$74.95.

LORAIN FLETCHER, *Charlotte Smith: A Critical Biography*.
Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001. 401 pp. \$24.95.

For a while there it seemed every third book on early modern culture bore the image of a woman reading on its cover. The iconic image mirrored the aspirations of a new generation of academic feminists, gave notice that man as proper object of study had given way to woman as center of her own consciousness, and hinted at a refocusing of scholarly attention that has reshaped the way we think and write about women's lives. Stories about female casualties of the patriarchy have become, it would seem, a thing of the past. The subjects of the three biographical studies under review were all active agents in the print world, eager to exploit the repertoire of opportunities whose emergence Paula McDowell traced in *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics, and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace 1678-1730* (Oxford, 1998), and engaged participants in that "extreme activity of mind" (the phrase is Virginia Woolf's) that characterized female existence in the second half of the eighteenth century. The story of women's lives that compels

THE JOURNAL FOR EARLY MODERN CULTURAL STUDIES

Vol. 5, No. 1 (Spring/Summer 2005) © 2005

academics these days is a story of female agency enacted within a cultural field accessed through the democratizing possibilities of print.

The subjects of two of these biographies—*I'll Tell You What: The Life of Elizabeth Inchbald* (2001) by Annibel Jenkins and *Charlotte Smith: A Critical Biography* (2003) by Loraine Fletcher—were leading figures in the literary culture of their day. Inchbald (1753–1821)—actress, playwright, novelist, and critic—began publishing in 1784 and for a twenty-year period was in effect playwright-in-residence at Covent Garden (winter) and the Haymarket (summer), writing or adapting twenty-one plays. Smith (1749–1806), a novelist and poet who wrote to support the needs of her large family, produced lengthy novels at the rate of about one per year for nearly a decade. Although she began writing relatively late in life, aged thirty-eight, she quickly became England's most popular novelist. Where the biographies of Inchbald and Smith belong to the venerable life-and-works tradition, Lynda M. Thompson's *The "Scandalous Memoirists": Constantia Phillips, Laetitia Pilkington and the shame of "publick fame"* (2000) is not so much a life of Constantia Phillips (1709–65), Laetitia Pilkington (c. 1706–1750), and other self-vindicating female memoirists as it is an analysis of the discursive self constructed by each in an effort to take control of a public image and parlay a scandalous life into material gain. Their collusion with exploitative constructs of women and willingness to project themselves as victims has made them tricky figures for feminism but fascinating subjects for a meditation on the complexities of female self-representation at mid-century.

In *Reflections on Biography* (1999), Paula Backscheider pointed out that biographies of female subjects, even those attuned to feminist concerns, often overlook a theme of defining importance in women's lives, that of "a woman's realization of economic independence" (143). If the works under review are any indication, the economic theme is now front and center. Each is a survival story turning upon a woman's struggle to use print to achieve financial independence (Inchbald) or to hold pecuniary distress at bay (Phillips, Pilkington, Smith). Each subject had a professional if not jaundiced attitude toward writing—Smith famously declared that she "loved novels no more than a grocer does figs" (1)—and an obsession with economic security. Even as a newly married teenager Inchbald sought to look after her own financial interests. She died "comfortably well-off" (514), but she acquired her modest fortune—£5000 in annuities—by dint of a regime of frugality that in her own lifetime earned her a reputation for mean stinginess. Smith joined her wastrel husband in debtor's prison and battled all her life with debt, duns, and a legal system that

gave her husband right to her earnings, and she was drawn into a lawsuit of such bewildering complexity (recalled as the Jarndyce and Jarndyce suit in *Bleak House*) that it was resolved only after her death. Phillips and Pilkington also spent time in debtor's prison and may have begun their memoirs there. They were caught in a net of scandal many times over—entangled in debt, lawsuits, well-publicized divorce cases, and irregular unions (bigamy and adultery as well as various out-of-wedlock relations). They embraced their roles as notorious outcasts, Pilkington calling herself “an heteroclite, or irregular verb, which can never be declined or conjugated” (111). Their stories share with Smith's an emphasis on feckless men, property battles, financial insecurity, and a legal system strongly favoring men and their interests. They wrote to proclaim their own victimization at the hands of men, abetted by a grossly unfair legal system, and they all, even the financially secure Inchbald, lodged a general protest against women's inequality before the law.

Accompanying this emphasis on financial existence is a heightened awareness of the intersections of money, sex, and gender. Thompson in particular demonstrates that charges of sexual immorality leveled at the scandalous memoirists often covered for anxieties about female economic activity and, contrariwise, that the stories the scandalous memoirists told were not so much about sex or desire as about a “fraught and unequal relationship to money, property, law and ‘priceless’ reputation . . . Beneath the gloss of sexual innuendo and flirtatiousness they wrote about debt, penury, imprisonment, humiliation, and violent abuse” (14). The complex intermingling of sexuality and economics shapes the life stories Jenkins and Fletcher imagined as well. Their engagement with the intertwined difficulties of bodily and financial existence in the material world of sex, money, and vastly unfair laws places each of these studies in the ongoing assault on the sentimental narrative of Woman and the Family, a narrative that began to coalesce during the period in which their subjects wrote and that continues to exert a stultifying allure to this day. Each of these books, then, contributes to the feminist demystification of the life-stories we have inherited and, read together, they furnish a vantage point from which to assess the usefulness of the stories we now advance in their place.

Annibel Jenkins's name is closely associated with biographical scholarship in the long eighteenth-century—an ASECS biennial prize for the best book-length biography is given in her name—so it is unpleasant to report that *I'll Tell You What: The Life of Elizabeth Inchbald* (2003) is a disappointment. It is too long for what it achieves, too short on analysis or interpretation, too

inattentive to the shaping and organization of its materials. The failings of this biography grow in part out of Jenkins's decision to rely heavily for her source materials upon entries in Inchbald's memoranda pocket-books, ten of which have survived, supplemented with materials taken from the earliest biography, the 1833 *Memoirs of Mrs. Inchbald* by playwright and journalist James Boaden, who knew Inchbald and had access to primary sources no longer available today. In relying upon the pocket-book entries Jenkins seems to have pursued the time-honored strategy of allowing the subject to emerge through her own language. Such a strategy works wonderfully with someone like Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, whose wit and personality are vibrantly present in her letters and other personal writings, as Grundy's splendid *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: Comet of the Enlightenment* (1999) testifies. (Along with Ruth Perry's *The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist* [1986], Grundy's life of Lady Mary is a model for a biography of a woman writer from the earlier reaches of the long eighteenth-century.) But in the case of Inchbald the pocket-book entries are anything but revelatory. The following, I am sorry to say, is typical: "my sister and nanny came, drank tea and packed up my things—walked to the House and the Doctor went to the Stage Coach with me—the coach full" (98–99). What the pocket-books do provide, and in abundance, is information—about dress, small domestic matters, and especially daily expenses—that permits a detailed if at times tedious reconstruction of the minutiae of Inchbald's everyday life. The painstaking recreation of the texture of everyday life can be both revelatory and compelling, as readers of Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard* (1990) are aware. But Jenkins seldom shapes these details into meaningful patterns. Facts pile up with all the shape and drama of sawdust on the workshop floor. They are treated as their own justification, the task of the biographer being to present details that are "interesting" or "important" although why they may be so is not always made clear. One week in March 1776 her washing cost her three shillings six pence; the next week, three shillings five pence two farthings. A pair of shoes cost her three shillings six pence; three weeks later she paid four shillings six pence for another pair (24). Some readers will welcome the presentation of uncontextualized facts—the eighteenth-century scholars who blurbed this biography focused approvingly on the wealth of information about daily life it delivers—but others will join me in finding it frustrating.

Frustrating too is Jenkins's strangely noncommittal approach to the life and works. She seems almost to pride herself upon not over-interpreting her

subject. (It is typical of her hands-off method that where one might expect to find analyses of Inchbald's plays and novels one finds instead plot summaries, some of them running to as many as ten pages or more.) To be sure, she does have a revisionary character to offer. Her Inchbald is a dedicated writing professional, endowed with a prodigious capacity for work and a "driving passion to become a writer" (97), an independent-minded woman determined to fulfill her own intellectual and spiritual imperatives. Yet in spite of the author's unwavering commitment to these character themes, Inchbald herself seems curiously out of focus, as if Jenkins's vision of her subject as a compelling individual life had gotten somehow swamped by the welter of pocket-book data. To take a trivial example, she seems not to have made up her mind about something as basic as the color of Inchbald's hair. First it is red-gold (13), then auburn (81), then golden (93). More seriously, she fails to explain the reasoning behind her biographical claims. The marriage between eighteen-year-old Elizabeth and thirty-seven-year-old Joseph Inchbald, a man frequently and unaccountably absent, is described for example as "a love match quite exceptional in theatrical circles" (11). How does she justify her conclusion, which runs counter to that of previous biographers and is presented without a scrap of evidence? It "seems obvious" (11). Unsupported conclusions are all too common in a book that, for all its passionate attachment to Inchbald and commitment to reconstructing the quotidian details of her life and times, seems strangely unfinished. Finally, I feel duty bound to report that Jenkins lifts without acknowledgment an entire paragraph from James Boaden's 1833 *Memoirs*. The paragraph on page 34 beginning "On their Sundays . . ." is taken word-for-word from a paragraph in the first volume of Boaden beginning at the bottom of page 81. The best to be said of this failure of documentation is that it is consistent with the carelessness that elsewhere saps the biography's vitality. Students of Inchbald will find much of value in *I'll Tell You What* but will also want to consult Boaden's still authoritative *Memoirs*, still perhaps the finest life.

Lynda M. Thompson in *The "Scandalous Memoirists": Constantia Phillips, Laetitia Pilkington and the shame of "publick fame"* (2000) does not seek to illuminate the deeper truths of character in the manner of traditional biography. She aims instead to investigate representations of female character at mid-century and expose the cumulative misrepresentations to which scandalous female lives have given rise. Her study, which is imbued with a post-structuralist's skepticism about the availability of the interior life, draws more particularly upon Felicity Nussbaum's argument in *The Autobiographical*

Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England (1989) that “character” in the mid-century sense—an essence, a projection of a private interior reality—is unavailable to women, who famously have no characters at all. *The “Scandalous Memoirists* is indeed something of an anti-biography. The figures under study are not so much “selves” with inner lives as they are the discursive effects of self-exculpatory rhetorical campaigns that are at once exercises in self-promotion and acts of proto-feminist resistance, in perhaps equal measure. The stories they project against emerging doctrines of the “separate spheres” are vehicles for public complaints about generalized injustices against women (inequities of law, the injustice of the sexual double standard). They are inevitably “troubling and anomalous” figures (as she says of Pilkington [81]), but also strangely admirable. Where earlier critics saw them as maladaptive—as failing to adjust to the new codes of femininity—she sees them as bold and resourceful opportunists armed with an arsenal of rhetorical weaponry and capable of taking “advantage of a period when patriarchal ideologies were in a state of flux” (5).

Thompson is at her best in showing the distortions that occur when life and life-story collide with cultural belief systems about female nature. The autobiographical texts of these memoirists—Phillips and Pilkington, but also Charlotte Charke, Lady Frances Vane, and others—have aroused condemnation from the start. More damagingly, they have been read inattentively. Only recently, in the work of Nussbaum, Lawrence Stone, Vivien Jones, Fidelis Morgan, Clare Brant, Kristina Straub, and others have the scandalous memoirists received a serious hearing. One way in which Thompson contributes to the new attentiveness is by carefully dismantling the distortions that have accumulated around these figures. Especially useful is her demystification of attacks on female sexual behavior. She shows, for example, that contemporary attacks on Phillips’s “voracious sexual appetite” mask a more basic concern over her appetite for money, and points out that one effect of framing in sexual rather than economic terms the scandals these women aroused is to ensure that “real position of a woman in [their] situation” has remained obscure (42). Especially valuable is her explosion of the long-held association between Phillips and the earl of Chesterfield. Since at least the *Dictionary of National Biography*, scholars have identified “Thomas Grimes,” Phillips’s early debaucher, with Chesterfield and have roundly denounced Phillips for her supposed mendacity in fingering Chesterfield for her ruin. In fact, as Thompson has persuasively shown, Phillips’s accusations were directed not at Chesterfield but rather at Sir Thomas Lumley-Saunderson, later the earl of Scarborough. Her careful ac-

count of the research and reasoning that brought her to this conclusion is at once a masterful piece of record-straightening and an indictment of the nineteenth-century men whose sloppy and arrogant readings of Phillips's *Apolo* condemn Phillips for commission of an error of their own making. In the process she offers an elegant summary of the way scholarship can operate like gossip as it takes up and embroiders unsubstantiated information that then becomes the basis for further embellishment, concluding with elegant irony that "these habits can breed rather easily in a discipline which prides itself on its rigorous research" (45). Thompson joins here the expanding company of feminist scholars who have succeeded in restoring to the center of their own lives women like Phillips whom old-boy scholarship had turned into "footnote[s] in the biographies of 'great men'" (44).

If Thompson brilliantly cuts through the rumor, gossip, innuendo, and myth generated by women whose well-publicized lives opened them to charges of rampant sexual appetite, she is less successful at relating their life-stories to the complex understandings of female existence at mid-century that scholars have been developing over the last decade or so. Eighteenth-century cultural theory, as Kathleen Wilson notes in *The Island Race*, is "now focused on formulating new analytics that go beyond the 'separate spheres' and gendered oppositions of 'public and private' to better capture Georgian women's complex social roles and status" (92). Thompson acknowledges the existence of these complexities in her introduction but too often her discussions put heavy stress on the relegation of women to the private domestic sphere and on publication as a flouting of gender ideology. Can one really say of the mid-century—the moment of Eliza Haywood, Charlotte Lennox, Elizabeth Carter, and Sarah Fielding, to mention only a few—that this was "a time when women were being encouraged to write 'retired' in the private space of the 'closet' to no larger an audience than an 'absent Friend' of the same sex"? (119; a nearly identical claim is found on 157). Moreover, Thompson's analysis fails to consider the emergence at this time of a strain of gender ideology that stressed women's role within the new public culture as symbolic and actual bearers of civility, sensibility, and refinement; as beings whose capacity for domestic virtue was both source and sign of national strength. Recent work on gender, empire, and patriotism by Wilson—see in addition to *Island Race* her earlier *Sense of the People: Politics, Culture, and Imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (1995), Harriet Guest in *Small Change: Women, Learning, Patriotism, 1750–1810* (2000), and others—complicates enormously the alignment of femininity and private being that Thompson takes for granted.

The recognition that discourses of politeness and sensibility tend to situate women “in the center of ‘society’ and its progress, key to the refinement, elevation, polish and support of their men” (Wilson, *Island* 23) would suggest that the scandal of the scandalous memoirists may have resided less in their transgression of feminine boundaries, as Thompson would argue, than in their disregard for the new national enthusiasm for the reforming woman who turns her attention to promoting imperial strength and the greater national good.

In other ways the book seems, as did Jenkins’s on Inchbald, somewhat unfinished. Thompson’s practice of moving through a chain of details to arrive at last at a claim can be frustrating to someone like me who began the book with only a passing acquaintance with Phillips, Pilkington, and the others. I would have appreciated more in the way of background information as well as a more aggressive foregrounding of ideas. The book suffers as well from occasional incoherence. She discusses at length the fact that the memoirists disdained the screening devices popular at the time, appearing in their stories in their own person, but observes elsewhere that Phillips’s *Apology* was presented in the voice of a supposedly disinterested male narrator and its authorship had always been subject to speculation and rumors. One chapter assumes the decline of the patronage system; the next asserts that the moment was one in which authors “were increasingly commissioned to write by party or faction, patron or publishers” (128). We learn in one place that opposition to the novel mounted at mid-century; elsewhere that at mid-century the novel began to emerge as a respectable genre. Such inconsistencies add to the sense of conceptual drift that makes this book at times a confusing read. Finally, readers wanting to know more about Phillips will want to read Wilson’s chapter on her in *The Island Race*, “The Black Widow,” which looks (as Thompson does not) at the post-*Apology* phase of her life in Jamaica where she once again attracted rumor, scandal, and myth.

Fletcher’s *Charlotte Smith: A Critical Biography* (2001), a Palgrave reprint of the 1998 Macmillan hardback, is unquestionably the most satisfying of the three books. Indeed, at the risk of shredding my credibility as an academic reviewer, I confess I found myself at times almost giddy with pleasure at the daring, artfulness, and critical intelligence of this biography. It is, for starters, elegantly written. Each sentence advances a well-considered case on Smith’s behalf, like this from the opening paragraph: “Popularity and prolixity then are no particular recommendations now, but she has better claims to be remembered: a witty, vigorous prose style and a talent for satire and politi-

cal analysis" (1). For another, it delivers the old-fashioned pleasures of the traditional well-wrought biography: intimacy with an intriguing public figure; a sense of the interplay of inner and outer circumstance; the drama of the individual life; and the mystery of the creative personality. For yet another, it offers a convincing reassessment of Smith's place within literary history. Smith may have resented her forced march through volume after volume, "chained to her desk like a slave to her oar," as William Cowper put it, but in Fletcher's analysis she emerges a novelist of lasting importance in both her aims (she extended the scope of the novel to include, among other things, real-life marital experience and political commentary) and her influence. Responding to Burke, for example, she developed the image of the great house as an image for England and thus introduced into the novelistic tradition a narrative device that Austen and a host of succeeding novelists would pick up, as the names of such fictional great houses as *Mansfield Park*, *Chesney Wold*, and *Howard's End* remind us.

One surprising pleasure of this biography is its use of source materials that, in less skillful hands, would attract accusations of naiveté. She draws upon letters, archival materials, and contemporary accounts, as one would expect, but more daringly she draws upon fictionalized self-representations in the poetry and novels to tell the story of Smith's life before she entered into a public existence. Such reconstructions are inevitably uncertain, containing "too many mayes and perhapses" (3), but they offer the best approach to Smith's life in part because Smith herself often introduced barely disguised autobiographical self-projections into her novels, "expecting readers to recognise the dramatisation—as they did" (3). Fletcher scrupulously distinguishes between external sources and Smith's fictionalizations. Nonetheless her confident renderings of Smith's inner life ("Underneath the resolve to be blameless, though, and not just blameless but exemplary, a counter resolve was growing. She constantly fantasised about leaving him" [6]) may unsettle some readers of this journal. They might also find disconcerting her practice of calling her subject by her first name, a practice she is aware some might label "unprofessional," although again she disarms criticism by providing a tactful rationale: it was "part of Charlotte's professionalism" to provide her readers with "an unusual degree of intimacy through author-representative characters and direct address. It is an intimacy that still speaks to us two hundred years later, as I hope the reader will feel, and so will find 'Charlotte' neither intrusive nor patronising" (4). Perhaps her most audacious move is her assertion into the narrative of a figure she calls Jenny—Jane Austen we fig-

ure out quite quickly—whose imagined responses to Smith’s work help make the case for the indebtedness of later writers to Smith. Some readers will be put off by this sort of thing: “One of *Emmeline*’s most passionate readers was a twelve year old called Jenny, who lived near Basingstoke. She was as intellectually precocious as Charlotte had been, and had no problems with the novel’s vocabulary and complex sentences. She raced through it . . .” (102). Such bits of invention may strike some as precious or gratuitous, but by the penultimate chapter the impassioned young reader Jenny has become the coolly deliberative Austen, and in a chapter entitled “Jane Austen” Fletcher brilliantly demonstrates that Austen found her radical precursor both an antagonist and an inspiration for her satiric imagination, and makes a completely convincing case for reading Austen in dialogue with Smith. For me one of the great pleasures of this book is the frisson created by its mischievous flirtation with the taboos of academic sophistication.

If Fletcher’s willingness to mix fact and fiction may raise an eyebrow here or there, it is hard to imagine anyone unhappy with the cumulative account of Smith’s literary influence that develops alongside the story of her life. She convincingly places Smith at the center of a network of lively literary exchanges that crisscross backwards and forwards, bringing the image of the politicized great house into the literary mainstream, as has been mentioned. Her pioneering self-referential poems offered hints to Southey and Wordsworth and created a literary environment in which these poets felt freed to pursue their own experiments in “risk-taking *faux-naïf*” (265) personae. By building poems around the poet herself, to name just two of her contributions, Fletcher more than substantiates Wordsworth’s claim—it serves as one of the book’s epigraphs—that she is a poet “to whom English verse is under greater obligation than is likely to be either acknowledged or remembered.” Fletcher traces Smith’s influence on Scott, Radcliffe, and Austen and offers illuminating comparisons with her contemporaries Wollstonecraft, Burney, and Wordsworth, the latter of whom enters the story as an untested and unknown poet who sought out an acquaintance with the established Smith. So much one might expect. But one of the satisfactions of this study is its *unexpected* connections. Smith’s long poem *The Emigrants* looks forward to the *Prelude* but also to *Middlemarch*. In her contempt for the British legal system, Smith has affinities with her contemporary William Godwin, but in her predilection for intertextual games she anticipates Philip Roth. Fletcher explores Smith’s links with de Sade and suggests both may have been responding to the same cultural assumptions about male aggression and female passivity, and in the

course of the comparison deftly interbraids commentary on Frances Burney, as well.

The effect of such unexpected illuminations is to make a case for Smith's central role in the English literary tradition, a case that rests upon subtle understandings of the way literary influence works. Her reconstruction of networks of reciprocal literary exchange offers as well a response to the question of historical agency with which any healthy biography of a woman writer must struggle. How is one to portray women as beings who make things happen in the world? We are deeply familiar with the gravitational pull of the ideological construction we have inherited: men do, women are. Sidelined and subordinate, enclosed in a private domain that is either sex-saturated or intensely idealized, women historically have been conceptually disconnected from the world of historical change. Older biographical models tend to reinscribe women's position outside history in one of two ways: by making the female subject an exemplar, her life furnishing "matter of instruction" (as Boaden puts it in *Memoirs*), or by making her a figure out of romance—the "real-life heroine of a real-life novel" S. R. Littlewood invokes in the preface to *Elizabeth Inchbald and her Circle* (1921). In either case, whether moralized or aestheticized, the effect is the same: the female subject of a biography exists in a realm sealed off from time, history, and change. Even feminist biographers politically committed to the ideal of women's historical agency have found it no easy matter to imagine and activate the kind of conceptual circuitry that would enable female agency to be seen as moving through the public, historical world.

These three biographical studies exemplify strikingly different responses to the problem of historical agency. Jenkins appears to be unaware that there is a problem. Her *Inchbald* is at times a romance heroine—the biography opens with an episode presenting the teen-aged heroine setting off in Horatio Alger fashion to seek her fortune in London—and at others a figure illustrative of her moment, her life important for the light it casts on the worlds of theater, publishing, the literati through which she moved. Thompson, on the other hand, works hard to move her account in the opposite direction. She makes huge claims for the historical agency of the scandalous memoirists. Phillips and Pilkington contributed to the new modes of thinking associated with what would come to be regarded as the Romantic program—shifts in thinking about originality, uniqueness, a newly intimate and at the same time more deeply proprietary relationship with the text, and the commercial possibilities of the marketable truth-telling self. They contributed to the formation

of the sphere of public opinion and to a more humanitarian frame of mind, while their experiments in self-exposure shaped the emerging genre of the autobiography. The problem with such claims is that they are more often asserted than demonstrated, and they remain on such a high level of generality as to seem not so much true of her subject as true of the period. To take just one example, she wants us to see Pilkington's representations of Swift as contributing to the enriching of the concept of character as it was being developed in fictional and nonfictional narrative at the time. Doubtless she is right, but such a claim can hardly be tested and, moreover, it could be said about virtually anyone writing at this time, from Cibber to Johnson to Haywood. The historically specific contribution of these writers seems uncertain. But in fairness it is hard to know *how* to present female agency convincingly. For my money, Fletcher's old-fashioned literary criticism offers an exciting response to this problem. She makes a dazzling case for Smith's importance as a literary figure of almost immeasurable influence and persuades by embedding those claims within close, sensitive, and insightful readings of the poems and novels.

These biographical studies confirm that feminist perspectives have penetrated deeply into current understandings of the biographical enterprise. Much of their interest resides in the way each exposes the distance between the often grim economic realities of women's lives and the stereotype-driven sentimental narratives of romance, marriage, and the family that shaped earlier representations of female lives. Thompson in particular dives deeply into the realities obscured by the sentimental story of *The Family*. Some of the most absorbing portions of "*Scandalous Memoirists*" look squarely at matters occluded in eighteenth-century accounts of women's lives, aspects that remain under-discussed to this day—father-daughter incest, predilections for paedophilia, sexual abuse of girl children, and appallingly relaxed attitudes toward female sexual consent. But contemporary scholarly anxieties about biography as a form also shape these studies, and not always in positive ways. What counts as evidence? How much invention dare the scholarly biographer permit herself? Is the scholarly biography obliged to create a narrative line capable of sustaining the reader's interest? How does the biographer pursue the traditional goal of discovering "the deeper truth" of character in a critical environment skeptical of such notions as the unique personality, an accessible interior life, the autonomous self, truth? Jenkins's response is perhaps overly scrupulous. She opts to stay focused upon the materials in the memoranda books in order to stay close to the "reality" of Inchbald's life, in her own telling phrase. Her adherence to the self-recorded facts of the life contrasts with the

more *au current* distrust of facts exhibited by Thompson. The latter's archeological dig through layers of misrepresentation, distortion, and myth-making—through the old-boy gossip that once passed for scholarship—leaves the reader sharing her impression that the voice and experience of actual female persons is finally unrecoverable: “the ‘real Woman’” to whom Phillips sought to give voice has disappeared behind the “misconceptions which accrue around the appropriated *body*—of herself and her writing—of the publicly sexual woman” (74). Such skepticism lends itself to valuable analysis of the discrepancies between what can be known of a woman's life and the misrepresentations that have swirled into being around it, but to the extent that “the ‘real Woman’” is thus relegated to the ironized space of academic knowingness, it is no basis for a full-fledged biography. It is Fletcher's fearless life of Charlotte Smith that shows just how much can be accomplished when a biographer of wide-ranging intelligence and superb critical skills applies herself not to excavation but to re-creation. For a generation of critics who cut their teeth on Foucault this may seem a bit regressive, but Fletcher's wonderfully illuminating *Charlotte Smith: A Critical Biography* encourages me to believe that it is just such risk-taking that is now needed to carry forward the stories we tell of women's lives.

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