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The Future of Feminist Theory and Eighteenth-Century Studies

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For the sake of providing some historical context with respect to the topic of this special issue, "The Future of Feminist Theory in Eighteenth-Century Studies"—let me begin by pointing out that, for those of us who entered the profession in the 1970s, as I did, the future is now.¹ And I would like to affirm a truth with which I am confident few would disagree: that feminisms and feminist theory are alive and well at the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies (ASECS), and that in the last three decades they have transformed the field—as they have the humanities and the academy in general—in profound and irreversible ways.

In the 1970s, as you can imagine, eighteenth-century studies was not exactly a stronghold of feminist theory. I am not sure how many would consider it a stronghold of feminist theory now. But I must say that as I was reviewing the breadth and depth of recent feminist scholarship in the field in preparation for this essay, I was dazzled by the wealth of vibrant, interesting, and challenging work that has been published just since the turn of the twenty-first century—some of it by the contributors to this special issue.

Those of us setting out to do feminist work in eighteenth-century studies three decades ago had the energy that came with a sense of vocation and engagement in a young and heady cause, but we had nothing like the current abundance of stimulating feminist scholarship on which to draw. A visit to the ASECS web site plainly shows, moreover, that changes in the field since the emergence of feminism's second wave have been institutional as well as intellectual. In addition to conference programs brimming with sessions on women and gender, one encounters there the following bit of organizational history: while there was not a single female president of the society during the first ten years of its existence (from 1969–1979), seven of the last ten ASECS presidents have been women (that is, since 1998).²

The case I would like to make here is that, at this point in time, feminist

theory and eighteenth-century studies have a mutually constitutive relation to one another—that, in some sense, the one doesn't exist (or to echo a phrase of Luce Irigaray's, "the one doesn't stir") without the other.³

It is not just that modern liberal feminism emerged in the long eighteenth century with the work of Mary Astell, Mary Wollstonecraft, and others (though that is certainly an important part of the story). It is also that you cannot have feminist theory that is nuanced, intersectional, and able to think beyond heteronormative structures of identity without a deep understanding of its Enlightenment legacies—both positive and negative; without, that is, an understanding of feminism's own roots in an emerging modernity shaped by a range of class, national, and imperial projects and the various emancipatory movements that were bound up with them.

As feminist scholars from Mary Poovey to Felicity Nussbaum have maintained, liberal feminism betrays its bourgeois origins in a range of internal conflicts and ideological contradictions. Wollstonecraft's individualism constrains her critique of marriage as an institution; her appropriation of Enlightenment reason for women sometimes leads to her bracketing of the body (or of female homoeroticism) along class lines, or to her displacement of unruly eroticism onto women of other races and other cultures.⁴

The long eighteenth century represents an extraordinarily complex and heterogeneous moment for women in Europe and its colonies. A period of intense socio-cultural transformation, it witnessed the shifts in class and kinship structures that produced the modern nuclear family, and it saw the consolidation of modern gender ideologies. Occurring within the broader geopolitical context of burgeoning commercial and imperial expansion, these developments had effects on women that were profound and varied across class, national, and racial divides.

The rise of print culture and the emergence of a literary marketplace brought economic and cultural opportunities to educated women, despite the ostracism that attended women's entry into the public sphere; and women played a significant role in the early development of the novel, which would become the dominant literary genre of modernity. The flourishing of European culture and the intellectual, artistic, and economic opportunities such prosperity afforded many women were buttressed by Enlightenment ideals: liberal republican principles in the period's early stages and the revolutionary politics of its final decades. But these opportunities were also delimited by pernicious gender and class hierarchies, and European prosperity was inextricably tied up with the brutal exigencies of the Atlantic slave trade, an institution within whose power relations women occupied uneven and often contradictory positions as victims and oppressors in both metropolitan centers and colonial peripheries. Modern liberal feminism grew up in this environment, as did the abolition movement, early racial science, and, incipiently, the science of sexuality. In order to avoid inadvertently reproducing classist, racist, colonialist, or heterosexist discourses

tied up with its own Enlightenment provenance, contemporary feminist theory needs to ground itself in a thorough understanding of the paradoxes and cross-currents of this complex, eighteenth-century history.

By the same token, you cannot have a robust and historically responsible eighteenth-century studies without a nuanced understanding of feminist theory. Yes, I know; the more things change the more they stay the same, and some of us still have colleagues who proceed as if feminist theory never existed. But I am speaking now not of any individual version of eighteenth-century studies; I am speaking of eighteenth-century studies in the broadest sense as a diverse body of scholarship, of eighteenth-century studies as an institution.

Try to imagine the field of eighteenth-century studies today without a history of women writers and their role in the literary marketplace; or of the family; or of any of the following other important cultural phenomena: domesticity; sexuality; the feminized east; the gendering of race, the metropolis, the world of finance and public credit; masculinities; the gendered politics of empire and of abolition; the birth of feminism; the consolidation of modern gender ideologies and their implications for how we have understood and continue to understand class, race, same-sex desire, and national and cultural identities. All of these aspects of eighteenth-century studies as it is now constituted are profoundly shaped by the emergence and development of feminist theory and its enduring influence.

On numerous fronts, scholars have brought feminist modes of inquiry to bear on the study of eighteenth-century literature and culture in ways that have revolutionized the field. No one working on the history or theory of the early novel these days can afford to ignore the foundational work of scholars like Janet Todd, Ros Ballaster, Cheryl Turner, Catherine Gallagher, and Paula McDowell, among others, in establishing the importance, extent, and nature of women's contributions to the development of early prose fiction, or to disregard Nancy Armstrong's analysis of the class implications of this expanding female literary authority.⁵ Paula Backscheider has provided foundational work on eighteenth-century women poets.⁶ Ruth Perry, Isobel Grundy, and Margaret Doody have provided indispensable accounts of the lives and careers of Mary Astell, Mary Wortley Montagu and Frances Burney, respectively.⁷ Feminist literary and historical scholarship has complicated and enriched postcolonial approaches to the field: Nussbaum demonstrates how early feminism sometimes colluded with domestic ideals of femininity to promote racist and imperialist agendas; Laura Brown shows how the female figure functioned as both scapegoat and alibi for colonial violence in mainstream literary representations; Betty Joseph mines deployments of the female figure in colonial systems of meaning for conjunctures between the histories of British and Indian women during the early days of imperial India; and in distinct and important ways, historians Kathleen Brown, Jennifer Morgan, and Kathleen Wilson illuminate how the complex discursive and ideological imbrications of gender, race, nation, and empire in the

period both affected and made use of the bodies, lives, and labors of women in transatlantic and transpacific contexts.⁸ These contributions are just a sampling of the important work that has been done.

Of course, it was not so very long ago that there was an eighteenth century without women—when undergraduate courses on the age of Dryden, or Pope, or Johnson included nary a work by a woman writer and when classroom editions of such authors as Aphra Behn, Eliza Haywood, and Maria Edgeworth (now on the exam reading lists of almost every doctoral student in the field as well as on many an undergraduate syllabus) were unavailable. We had no paperback version of *Fantomina* before 1996, when Backscheider and John Richetti's *Popular Fiction by Women, 1660–1730* first appeared; and as recently as 1993 John Guillory, in a discussion of the canonicity of Thomas Gray's famous *Elegy*, could still justly characterize Laetitia Barbauld (referring to her as "one 'Mrs. Barbauld'") as "a writer *no one* would regard today as canonical" though she was "well known in her own day" (my emphasis).⁹ No one would be likely to make such a sweeping or casual statement about Barbauld's cultural capital any more; and so dismissive a contrast between her importance and that of Gray would now at the very least be matter for some debate.

In other words, what is at stake in talking about the future of feminist theory in eighteenth-century studies is not just the future of feminist theory but the future of eighteenth-century studies as well. In fact, I am not entirely comfortable with the way the trope of containment in the title for the original roundtable that led to this special issue ("The Future of Feminist Theory *in* Eighteenth-Century Studies") privileges eighteenth-century studies as the host term, while feminist theory becomes the dispensable variable in the formulation—the guest that drops in (or, dare I say, the parasite?).¹⁰ I appreciate the occasional logic of this choice: the roundtable was, after all, at the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies. Nevertheless, I want to argue that eighteenth-century studies independent of feminist theory is not eighteenth-century studies worthy of the name. The two go together, and they feed each other reciprocally. They also grow together, so that the changing face of feminist theory in the future will likely change the face of eighteenth-century studies and vice versa.

To point to just two of the many possible examples of how this symbiosis works, consider recent scholarship by Katherine Binhammer and Susan Lanser—quite separate work that uses eighteenth-century women's writing to challenge and complicate prevailing conceptual paradigms not only within eighteenth-century studies but also within feminist theory, queer theory, and the histories of gender and sexuality.¹¹ By deftly showing how gender identity in the 1790s' feminism of Wollstonecraft, Mary Hays, Mary Robinson, and others is ultimately constructed *through* sexuality and, conversely, how sexual identity in these women's texts is grounded in gendered practices, Binhammer makes the study of eighteenth-century texts the occasion for a critique of the recent tendency within feminist and queer studies to theorize sexuality and gen-

der as independent categories. Arguing that “the first theoretical articulations of ‘modern feminism’ have much to teach contemporary feminist and queer theorists about the difficult yet powerful connections between gender and sexuality,” she offers a model for getting beyond the methodological impasses of much feminist and queer thinking which, while situating sexuality outside the domain of feminist analysis, has tended to exclude feminist or gender issues from the purview of queer studies.¹²

In a similar kind of move, Lanser places Michael McKeon’s influential account of the history of gender in the long eighteenth century in conversation with eighteenth-century writings about sapphism and sapphic separatism in order to show that the powerful imbrication of sexuality, gender, and class that McKeon rightly identifies as the ground of modern patriarchy is more complicated and uneven, and indeed more influenced by female same-sex desire, than he allows.¹³ While in McKeon’s formulation, biological sex functions as a relatively unalterable category to stabilize the more inherently mobile category of class, Lanser identifies a body of narratives representing what she calls *sapphic picaresque* that challenges the sex/class system McKeon describes. By denying sex and sexuality any stabilizing power, these texts stand as evidence that it is also possible for class to operate as a stabilizer of sexual identity and that the constitutive operations of sex, gender, sexuality, and class that McKeon so usefully illuminates are in fact more unstable and more mobilized by female homoeroticism than he assumes.¹⁴ Such work not only advances the longstanding feminist projects of recovery and rereading, it also challenges and transforms reigning assumptions in the field of eighteenth-century studies by bringing the insights of feminist theory to analysis of eighteenth-century texts.

But what about the future of feminist theory in general? We are all familiar with the current climate of wariness surrounding the dreaded F-word, and with some of the political and theoretical impasses created by feminism’s own recent questioning of the usefulness of WOMEN as an analytic category. Some say that feminism has exhausted itself—that to talk about women as a group is to efface other vectors of difference—because the category WOMEN itself is always implicitly essentialist and ethnocentric. Thus, they argue, cultural studies has rightly superseded feminism. Others worry that cultural studies is usurping feminism’s project and, in the process, erasing from the discussion not just the *category* of WOMEN, but women as well.

There are feminist theorists trying to help us think our way out of the traps created by the growing imperative to restrict generalization in response to charges of essentialism. My Michigan State University colleague Marilyn Frye, a feminist philosopher best known for her foundational book *The Politics of Reality*, argues for example that rather than getting rid of the category WOMEN we ought to be radically rethinking our own presuppositions about *what social categories are*.¹⁵ Instead of continuing to conceive of social categories as “sets” (or closed, micro-structural units that have *essential* qualities), Frye suggests,

we should redefine such categories as multi-dimensional entities (or “correlational densities,” as she also calls them) that are contingent, empirical, and open to change and whose coherence is *not essential* but *relational*. By theorizing the possibility of studying women as a group without inevitably eliding differences, such work holds out the promise of linking categories and people without presuming essences.

Emerging trends in academic and intellectual circles, where talking about women seems to be something of a growing taboo, suggest that we ought to heed the efforts of those, like Frye, who seek to show that WOMEN can continue to function as a useful analytic category. My own observations, moreover, suggest that WOMEN is not the only disappearing term in current critical discourse; gender (for some time now WOMEN’s competitor and apparent successor, as the titles of many former “women’s studies” programs testify) now seems to be vanishing as well. I have encountered several examples of this tendency lately—in the tables of contents of reference works and in widely circulated electronic CFPs—where queerness, ethnicity, and race are expressly featured as discrete topics of critical interest but where no explicit (or implicit) mention is made of women, gender, or feminisms at all.

This is an interesting development—one that I did not see even five years ago and that warrants watching and analysis. I am not sure of its provenance (or its goal), but it seems to be predicated on the notion that women, gender, and feminism have by now been so thoroughly addressed that they no longer need to be marked as a distinct topic or set of topics. Perhaps it is imagined that we are now in a position to move beyond the tired habits of an old identity politics, with its seemingly obligatory lists of oppressions and social determinants (gender, race, class, sexuality, etc.) to more inherently heterogeneous models of human identity. Perhaps it is supposed that the importance of certain categories can now be assumed, that women and gender are so universally understood as a significant dimension of the analysis of everything else that there is no longer any need for their treatment as such, or indeed for feminism(s).

As nice as all this might sound, political realities defy it, and we have seen the totalizing effects of the impulse to *simply* mainstream the study of women and gender before.¹⁶ If a critique of identity politics is the driving force behind the impulse to erase the visibility of women and gender as distinct topics of intellectual urgency, how does one account for the continuing representation of queer, race, and ethnic studies as distinctly marked critical entities? Where does this trend locate queer women and women of color? Surely, the objective of ongoing critique of the limits of a liberal feminist analytic (some of it coming from queer, postcolonial, and critical race studies, but much of it also originating from within feminism itself) is to complicate, enrich, and expand the analysis of women’s history and of the constitutive operations of gender within culture, not to eliminate it. So why, one wonders, has the elision of women and gender become permissible (or even *de rigueur*) just now? Has feminism’s loss

of academic capital in the wake of such challenges spawned a tacit reluctance on the part of scholars to question the omission of *WOMEN* as a marked critical category when it occurs, lest they be identified with what some seem to regard as an outdated and unpopular political and intellectual project? Are there simply fewer watchdogs in the wings, fewer feminists at the table willing to raise questions or speak up?

This brings me to my last point, which is that the future of feminist theory is in the hands of our students and thus in the classroom, where we ought to be posing questions like these. Not just in classrooms where we teach feminist theory as such, as some of us do in our respective disciplines. But also in our courses on the eighteenth century, where we can make students aware of the importance of the period to understanding the twentieth- and twenty-first-century present, even as we bring new paradigms for thinking about gender, sexuality, and other categories of identity to bear productively on eighteenth-century texts. We need to locate feminism historically for students, introducing them to the content and significance of the works of early feminist thinkers like Astell, Wollstonecraft, Hannah More, and Olympe de Gouges alongside the writings of such male Enlightenment thinkers as John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Thomas Paine; and we need to guide them through the complexities of the socioeconomic and geopolitical contexts in which such writings were produced. It is important for students to be able to see the historical and discursive dimensions as well as the deep inter-implication of such concepts as gender, sex, sexuality, desire, race, and a host of other categories that shape understandings of social identity. Since the modern meanings of many of these concepts were in the process of formation during the eighteenth century, we are in a unique position to help students not just to appreciate the complex roots of their own cultural inheritance (including the ways in which ideas about sex and gender are intertwined with the troubled meanings of terms like liberty, progress, rationality, etc.) but also to see that many of the seemingly inalienable truths of modernity are historical and subject to change. Only then will they have the tools to think their way through the traditions that have shaped their present and thereby develop the forms of agency they will need to chart the future. In the process, it would behoove us to help them see that the category *WOMEN* need be neither reified *nor* committed to erasure and to proffer the encouragement they will need to keep feminist questions alive and on the table.

NOTES

1. A shorter version of this essay was presented as part of a Women's Caucus Roundtable entitled "The Future of Feminist Theory in Eighteenth-Century Studies" at the 39th Annual ASECS meeting in Portland, Oregon, in March 2008.

2. For a list of ASECS's past executive board members, see <http://asecs.press.jhu.edu/pastexbd.html>.

3. Luce Irigaray, "And the One Doesn't Stir Without the Other," trans. Helene Vivienne Wenzel, *Signs* 7 (1981): 60–67.

4. Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft, Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen* (Chicago, 1984); Felicity Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, and Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives* (Baltimore, 1995). For another approach to Wollstonecraft, that identifies her political vision as a religiously inspired utopian radicalism rather than a form of bourgeois liberalism, see Barbara Taylor, *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (Cambridge, 2003).

5. Janet Todd, *The Sign of Angellica: Women, Writing and Fiction, 1600–1800* (New York, 1989); Ros Ballaster, *Seductive Forms: Women's Amatory Fiction from 1684 to 1840* (Oxford, 1992); Cheryl Turner, *Living by the Pen: Women Writers in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1992); Catherine Gallagher, *Nobody's Story: The Vanishing Acts of Women Writers in the Marketplace 1670–1820* (Berkeley, 1994); Paula McDowell, *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace, 1678–1730* (Oxford, 1998); Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York, 1990).

6. Paula Backscheider, *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets and their Poetry: Inventing Agency, Inventing Genre* (Baltimore, 2005).

7. Ruth Perry, *The Celebrated Mary Astell: An Early English Feminist* (Chicago, 1986); Isobel Grundy, *Lady Mary Wortley Montagu: Comet of the Enlightenment* (Oxford, 1999); Margaret Doody, *Frances Burney: The Life in the Works* (New Brunswick, 1986).

8. Laura Brown, *Ends of Empire: Women and Ideology in Early Eighteenth-Century Literature* (Ithaca, 1993), and *Fables of Modernity: Literature and Culture in the English Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca, 2003); Betty Joseph, *Reading the East India Company 1720–1840: Colonial Currencies of Gender* (Chicago, 2004); Kathleen M. Brown, *Foul Bodies: Cleanliness in Early America* (New Haven, 2009); Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia, 2004); Kathleen Wilson, *Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 2002).

9. Backscheider and John Richetti, eds., *Popular Fiction by Women, 1660–1730* (New York, 1996); John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago, 1993), 103–4.

10. Hence the adjustment in my title of this piece.

11. Katherine Binhammer, "Thinking Gender with Sexuality in 1790s' Feminist Thought," *Feminist Studies* 28, no. 3 (2002): 667–90; Susan S. Lanser, "Sapphic Picaresque, Sexual Difference and the Challenges of Homo-adventuring," *Textual Practice* 15, no. 2 (2001): 251–68.

12. Binhammer, 668–69.

13. See Lanser; and Michael McKeon, "Historicizing Patriarchy: The Emergence of Gender Difference in England, 1660–1760," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 28, no. 3 (1995): 295–322.

14. As Lanser notes, McKeon largely follows Randolph Trumbach in assuming the relative cultural insignificance of sapphism in the emergence of modern patriarchy in the eighteenth century (253).

15. Marilyn Frye, "Kinds of People: Ontology and Politics," (2008 Phi Beta Kappa Romanell Lectures at Michigan State University), and *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Freedom, Calif., 1983). My use of the term WOMEN in small caps to signify its use as a category is borrowed from Frye.

16. See for example, Deborah Rosenfelt, "What Women's Studies Programs Do that Mainstreaming Can't," *Women's Studies International Forum* 7, no. 3 (1984): 167–75; and Susan Hardy Aiken, et al. eds., *Changing Our Minds: Feminist Transformations of Knowledge* (Albany, 1988), esp. chap. 7. For more recent debates about mainstreaming, see *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 9, no. 5 (1997), a special issue reprinted as *Women Studies on the Edge*, ed. Joan Scott (Durham, 2008).