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Future Conditional: Feminist Theory, New Historicism, and Eighteenth-Century Studies

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In 1987, the editors of *The New Eighteenth Century* worried: “one danger in the ‘rise’ of new historicism in America lies in its potential establishment as a new orthodoxy, particularly if it comes to be perceived as a flight from the theoretical possibilities of other post-structuralist movements such as deconstruction, or as an alternative to the more explicit political commitments of Marxism, feminism, and antiracist, postcolonial critiques.”¹ In areas where new historicism’s emergence produced a radical refashioning of critical practices—as in the field of British Romanticism, for instance—the historical and literary claims advanced by its practitioners have been hotly contested.² The field of eighteenth-century studies has proven more hospitable to new historicism, in part because of its long-standing resistance to the formalist imperatives that shaped both New Criticism and, later, structuralism and deconstruction.³ But if new historicism has indeed become the new orthodoxy, it has not led, in eighteenth-century studies, to the end of political criticism. Rather, I suggest, new historicism has absorbed politics into its narratives, becoming, perhaps, overly inclined to find a fit between the investments of the past and our own.⁴

I still remember clearly the surprise I felt when I read, about ten years ago, this sentence in the introduction to Carol Kay’s *Political Constructions*: “Of all the movements that have recently nourished democratic hopes, feminism has affected my life most dramatically.” Nothing in the pages previous, which describe Kay’s interest in British political philosophy and the rise of the novel, prepared me for Kay’s announcement of her personal indebtedness to feminism, nor for her expression, a few sentences later, of a desire “to sustain specifically political activism within the feminist movement.”⁵ These sentences cast a new light on the book and led me to read the chapters that followed differently than I would have, had they not appeared. While a myriad of causes might explain my surprise (including, most simply, a shift in sensibility between generations of feminists), I believe our field’s embrace of new historicism renders it dif-

ficult, today, to announce a feminist commitment as openly as did Kay twenty years ago. This essay examines what feminist theory has to offer a field that has always, for the most part, put history first.⁶ In particular, I argue that it encourages the analysis of desires that historicisms, old and new, tend to disown.⁷ Feminist theory is not singular in its ability to name its critical investments, but it confronts us with the importance of doing so in a particularly forceful way.⁸

I focus my attention here on two features of new historicist practice that contribute to the attenuation of both theoretical and political references: its suspicion of master narratives and its critical aesthetics. Both in terms of the objects it studies and the academic discourse it maintains, new historicism has fostered a critical interest in power—the operations of containment, the possibilities of subversion, and the individual and collective acts that together shape the meaning of cultural artifacts and their circulation in the world. And yet the politics of new historicism have proved difficult to pin down, despite the fact that many of its practitioners study under-represented or marginalized subjects. The reasons for this difficulty can be traced, first, to new historicism's resistance to narratives that attach the operations of power to a particular set of relations. New historicists examine the "hidden places of negotiation and exchange" where representations are circulated within economies of "relative systems."⁹ This attention to the particularity of power's operations, in turn, draws new historicist scholars close to the objects they study and away from the kinds of abstraction that characterize theory: "My own work has always been done with a sense of just having to go about and do it, without establishing first exactly what my theoretical position is," writes Stephen Greenblatt.¹⁰ The idea of choosing the work first and the theoretical position second precludes the possibility of using a shared perspective as a critical starting point: "No progress can be made on methodological problems without total immersion in practice, and that immersion is not for us fundamentally collaborative: it is doggedly private, individual, obsessive, lonely."¹¹

The absence of clearly marked theoretical sign-posts has created challenges for those following in the footsteps of new historicism's first practitioners. We cannot point to any one or two key theoretical texts—vol. 1 of Michel Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, for instance, or Hayden White's *Metahistory*—as the key that will unlock new historicism's theoretical agenda. To reflect on new historicism's antecedents is to cover a vast array of material and thinkers, from Theodor W. Adorno to Clifford Geertz to Walter Benjamin to Roland Barthes to Karl Marx and Raymond Williams. When reading this material, the problem of scope is compounded by the problem of focus—as in, what should it be? Culture, representation, history? The problems posed by new historicism's lack of a defined methodology are compounded by its practitioners' success in greatly expanding the terrain of cultural texts and objects considered worthy of critical attention. Students trained by new historicists will travel into the diversified fields that now constitute literary and cultural studies. The proliferation

of primary texts calls forth a similarly diverse cast of supporting material. As the field expands, the number of shared objects contracts, and critical conversations take on added dimensions. Alternative forms of academic politics have emerged as we struggle to designate additional domains within old regimes (the British eighteenth century) and new ones (transnational, transatlantic, multilingual eighteenth centuries).

The second problem that attends efforts to trace new historicism's political and theoretical commitments to their source arises from the critical aesthetics that have evolved out of its practices. The subjects of the anecdotes that shape new historicism's narratives, first recovered as a means of accessing counter-histories, now take center stage. For a generation that considers stories of farm laborers and street workers worth its attention, the ephemera and anecdotes that introduce us to their worlds carry no particular charge or historiographical challenge: their subjects now stand alongside more mainstream topics and narratives, complementary rather than subversive. A commitment to the archives means that eighteenth-century scholars are particularly well equipped to find the material that, in earlier times, would have served merely as supporting evidence to master narratives of the literary canon or Enlightenment history. The defamiliarizing effect the anecdote once had has now become neutralized through use, its eccentricity lost on readers who have grown up with it.¹² Further, the idea that adding a new political inflection to the writing of history (by placing, for example, a marginal subject at the center of a historical narrative) counts as radical historiography fails to answer the challenge posed by White: "One of the things one learns from the study of history is that such a study is never innocent . . . where launched from the perspective of the Left, the Right, or the Center." In our desire to replace an older historicism with one we consider more progressive, we may have lost sight of historical writing's allegorical dimension, its habit of "saying one thing and meaning another."¹³ As a critical discourse, historical realism is easy to fall into and hard to climb out of.

Feminist theory provides us with one way to focus our attention on the investments governing the histories we write. To demonstrate how theory allows us to step back from the period, I turn to the example provided by Amanda Vickery's interrogation of Nancy Armstrong's representation of eighteenth-century culture and gender. Armstrong's ground-breaking *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (1987) brought Foucault and his vision of middle-class disciplinary power into a feminist frame of reference. Armstrong identifies eighteenth-century moral reform literature as the gold standard of the middling ranks' cultural currency. Modern novels advance the goals of the middle class by separating private life from its social articulation and by disengaging sexuality from political history. Women belong to the home, fiction tells us, and the home exists as a space apart from the marketplace.¹⁴ Ten years later, however, Vickery launched a powerful critique of the separate spheres thesis. Most broadly, Vickery suggests that the division between private and public that Armstrong identifies as the bedrock

of modern gendered subjectivity “could be applied to almost any century or culture—a fact that robs the distinction of analytical purchase.”¹⁵ She goes on to advance a historical argument that focuses its attention on the transformation of urban spaces in eighteenth-century England and the opportunities for public engagement this transformation afforded women of the period: “the increased harping on the proper female sphere might just as easily demonstrate a concern that more women were seen to be active outside the home rather than proof that they were so confined.” While acknowledging the shift toward propriety Armstrong (and others) stress, Vickery reads that shift as equally important for men and women, part of a larger cultural battle “for the soul of eighteenth-century gentility.”¹⁶

The stark difference between Armstrong’s and Vickery’s cultural histories of gender in the eighteenth century alerts us to the larger questions raised by their analyses. What is the difference between power and influence? Was the founding of modern liberalism premised on the exclusion of women from the political sphere or was that exclusion a continuation of past practices, open to interrogation with the advent of liberal democratic discourses? Does the advocacy of moral authority anticipate the language of human rights or function as an ideological tool that enables the continued exploitation of disenfranchised groups? Does the privileging of one group of women depend on the marginalization of another? Further, questions of evidence arise: How do literature and culture “reflect” historical realities? How can we measure their impact on readers’ attitudes and behaviors? Clearly, both Armstrong and Vickery have feminist goals in view as they write their cultural histories of women and the eighteenth century.¹⁷ Against the idea of women’s perpetual victimization, both suggest that women exercised authority over the course of the long eighteenth century, although they define that authority—and the power that attended its expression—in radically different ways. Each maintains a different version of women’s history, one whose limitations require that we “define another position from which to speak” unless we want to continue to live within their confines, one that refuses the idea of limitation as a spatial or gendered category.¹⁸ These two narratives are mutually exclusive. Much is to be gained from our awareness of the fact that historical narratives often clash—and that no amount of supplementary material will close the gap between competing narratives. Some archival studies are better than others, and all historical and literary claims require supporting evidence. But at the end of the day, critics will view the past through the lens of their desires, stated or unstated. Feminist theory names those desires and places the individual critic in dialogue with a larger community of scholars.

My attachment to feminist theory’s unsettling effects is the legacy of my training as a graduate student. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, new historicism was well established, but it was still competing with other theoretical discourses. In 1989, Diana Fuss’s *Essentially Speaking* was published; a year

later, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* appeared.¹⁹ These texts (among others) galvanized student conversations across historical fields and disciplines. The expression of our desires and investments manifested itself at the level of the sentence and in our choice of words. Today, I continue to draw on the energy generated by debates among feminists. For example, in my readings of Restoration and eighteenth-century cultural history, I have used the terms "whore" and "whoring." I use these words in an effort to reclaim them from the space of erotic misogyny they inhabit, but also to suggest their ability to mean other things, not just now, but in Restoration England. Problems attend this gesture: does my desire to link the courtesans I study to a larger understanding of sex work—both real and literary—in early modern England end up underestimating the violence and degradation that attended not only practices (notoriously difficult to document) but also the production and circulation of literary and cultural representations? Bringing the sex worker, called by any name, into a narrative—historical, literary, or critical—almost always upsets its smooth unfolding. Max Horkheimer and Adorno's discussion of the Enlightenment novel starts with *The Odyssey*:

In Book 22 of the *Odyssey*, there is a description of the way in which Odysseus' son punishes the faithless women who had reverted to prostitution. . . . The passage closes with the information that the feet of the row of suspended women "kicked out for a short while, but not for long." . . . As a citizen reflecting momentarily upon the nature of hanging, Homer assures himself and his audience (actually readers) that it did not last for long—a moment and then it was all over. But after the "not for long" the inner flow of the narrative is arrested. *Not for long?* The device poses the question, and belies the author's composure.²⁰

My own desire to disrupt the composure of literary history by drawing on the rhetorical violence embedded in the terms "whore" and "whoring" leads me back to feminist theory. I bring representations of the sex worker into view not only to recover a lost piece of the puzzle we call cultural history, but also to draw attention to the question of prostitution today, a subject that sharply divides feminists. It is hard to imagine analyzing representations of sex work in the eighteenth century without reference to contemporary debates, and my engagement with feminist theory keeps my own work and pedagogy alive to literature's, and history's, uncanniness.

Many years ago John Traugott perceptively remarked, "We seem able to think fresh thoughts only when a new fashion encroaches on an old one."²¹ Recent titles such as *The Revenge of the Aesthetic* suggest that a turn away from new historicism may be imminent in literary studies.²² But just as eighteenth-century studies has fought previous formalist turns in the past, so it will probably remain attached to both old and new historicist methods for at least a while yet.²³ My hope is that feminist theory will prove vital and interesting to

younger critics as they write their accounts of the period, and that our abiding love of historical narratives will not prevent us from examining the large epistemological questions that theory so capably frames. Feminist theory may not represent the hottest trend in the world of cultural studies today, but it can always put us on the hot seat if we let it.

NOTES

1. Laura Brown and Felicity Nussbaum, "Revising Critical Practices: An Introductory Essay," *The New Eighteenth Century: Theory, Politics, English Literature*, ed. Brown and Nussbaum (New York, 1987), 1–22, 20.

2. For a summary of the various charges leveled against new historicism, see Alison Conway, Bryce Traister, and Hunter Cadzow, "New Historicism," *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, 2nd ed., ed. Michael Groden, Martin Kreiswirth, and Imre Szeman (Baltimore, 2005), 698–702.

3. I don't mean, here, to undervalue or underestimate the struggle by scholars who encountered resistance in their attempt to refashion eighteenth-century studies in the 1970s and 1980s. Witness, for instance, the controversy generated by the publication of *The New Eighteenth Century* in 1987.

4. Janet Todd, for instance, observes, in her introduction to *Aphra Behn Studies*: "Feminist criticism took time to embrace the concept of multiple voices, of playful positions and subversive rhetoric. Now it perhaps faces the danger in finding Behn too much to its taste. For Aphra Behn responds to the concept of the subject dispersed and plays with a masculinizing desire so well that she may seem to become too pliant to our theories" (*Aphra Behn Studies*, ed. Todd [Cambridge, 1996], 3).

5. Carol Kay, *Political Constructions: Defoe, Richardson, and Sterne in Relation to Hobbes, Hume, and Burke* (Ithaca, 1988), 16, 17.

6. My commentary speaks specifically to critics of British literary history and their engagement with new historicism.

7. Judith Lowder Newton's 1989 essay, "History as Usual? Feminism and the 'New Historicism'" (*The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veesser [New York, 1989], 152–67) approaches the questions I raise here from a historicist perspective. That is, while she suggests that feminist history provides a corrective to new historicist blindspots, creating a more accurate narrative, I argue that feminist theory allows us to interrogate, more broadly, what we bring to our study of the past.

8. Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt note that "women's studies, and the feminism that motivated its formation, has served as an important, if little acknowledged, model for new historicism" (*Practicing New Historicism* [Chicago, 2000], 11). What interests me is the subordinate clause, "if little acknowledged," and the distance it marks between feminist theory and new historicism. For another perspective on the politics of new historicism's critical practice, see Louis A. Montrose, "Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture," *The New Historicism*, 15–36.

Marxist and anti-racist/postcolonial theory, the methodologies named alongside feminism by Brown and Nussbaum above, could ostensibly serve the same purpose in reminding us to name our political commitments. But these forms of critique are perhaps more readily absorbed by historicist discourses than is feminist theory, in part because their subjects (capitalism, imperialism/racism) have their roots in the period.

9. Greenblatt, "Towards a Poetics of Culture," *The New Historicism*, 1–14, 13, 12.

10. Greenblatt, "Towards a Poetics of Culture," 1.

11. Gallagher and Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*, 18.

12. On the original charges associated with new historicism's use of the anecdote, see Joel Fineman, "The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction," *The New Historicism*,

49–76; and, more recently, Gallagher and Greenblatt, “Counterhistory and the Anecdote,” *Practicing New Historicism*, 49–74.

13. Hayden White, *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore, 1987), 45.

14. Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York, 1987), 24, 48.

15. Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven, 1998), 7.

16. Vickery, 7, 287.

17. Armstrong discusses her relation to feminist criticism in the concluding chapter of *Desire and Domestic Fiction* (see 254–59). See also Newton, who discusses Armstrong's work alongside that of Mary Poovey and Gallagher.

18. Armstrong, 225.

19. Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (New York, 1989); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990).

20. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York, 1972), 79.

21. John Traugott, “Molesting *Clarissa*,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 15, no. 2 (Winter 1982): 163–70, 165.

22. Michael P. Clark, ed., *The Revenge of the Aesthetic: The Place of Literature in Theory Today* (Berkeley, 2000).

23. Indeed, the new formalism that has emerged in recent years in the field of eighteenth-century studies remains rigorously historical. See, for example, J. Paul Hunter's “Formalism and History: Binarism and the Anglophone Couplet,” *Reading for Form*, ed. Susan J. Wolfson and Marshall Brown (Seattle, 2006), 129–50.