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Feminism and Eighteenth-Century Studies: Working in the Bordello of History

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Feminism's early interventions in the study of Anglophone culture over the long eighteenth century were bold and radically altered our understanding of the period. With Felicity Nussbaum's *The Brink of All We Hate: English Satires on Women, 1660–1750* (1984), Ruth Perry's *The Celebrated Mary Astell* (1986), Elaine Hobby's *A Virtue of Necessity* (1989), and Donna Landry's *The Muses of Resistance* (1990), to name just a few of the important studies, feminism shattered the literary canon and made courses on the early English novel and eighteenth-century literature unimaginable without figures like Aphra Behn, Delarivier Manley, Eliza Haywood, and Frances Burney. There is, among those who led the argument by founding the ASECS Women's Caucus and those of us who follow in their footsteps, a justifiable sense of pride and satisfaction in thus altering the way undergraduates and graduates encounter the eighteenth century. But this sea-change has also been shadowed by a sense of anxiety and an underlying fear that, in achieving its most prominent goal, feminism rendered itself obsolete. Once the question of the canon had been ceded, what was left for feminism to contribute to eighteenth-century studies?

The most sustained response to the question has come from scholars following the lead of "new formalism" who have argued either explicitly or implicitly that feminism's most valuable contribution to eighteenth-century studies now lies in the realm of epistemology generally and aesthetics in particular.¹ However, as Marjorie Levinson has argued recently, "new formalism" never really rose to the level of a "theory" because it never fully articulated what was at stake in its arguments and was, thus, ill-equipped to devise a methodology.² Likewise, the new "feminist epistemologies" have inspired nuanced, highly insightful, local readings of specific authors that seem ill-equipped to disclose how it is that they advance, participate in, or even foreground feminism beyond the fact that they tend to focus on women writers struggling with the gendered contradictions of their own and/or their readers' aesthetic pleasure.³

While the effort to open a new frontier in feminism and eighteenth-century studies is valuable and, indeed, much work remains to be done by feminists on both the aesthetic and on epistemology, it is disturbing that the trumpeting of a "new feminism" is attended by a sense that we have finished our business with the past. I want to suggest here that, as feminists, our business with history is not done by half, and beyond that our business with History, as both a political and a social fiction, is exactly what we need to be focusing on.

Most recent analyses of feminism's relation to eighteenth-century studies have focused on the early recovery work. But, in the 1990s, a small group of scholars began to expand that project radically by making the case that feminist literary history had remained blind to the important work and writings of non-elite women. Hobby, of course, did critical work bringing to light the writings of radical and sectarian women; likewise Landry's *Muses of Resistance: Laboring-Class Women's Poetry in Britain, 1739–1796* revealed not only a brief moment in eighteenth-century literary history when laboring women had appreciative audiences for their writing but also the foreclosure of that moment. More recently, Paula McDowell's groundbreaking study *The Women of Grub Street* (1998) offered remarkable evidence and insight into women's role as both the producers and purveyors of print culture, as well as a more rigorous and self-aware model for how we might undertake the production of new knowledge about non-elite women. Peculiarly, these studies have not had the same effect on undergraduate and graduate curricula. With few exceptions, they have been embraced largely as background work that illuminates our understanding of "mainstream" literature but not as works that fundamentally reorient our understanding of eighteenth-century culture. It is easy enough to attribute the lack of effect as a casualty of university courses struggling to cope with students who seem to have ever-diminishing attention spans and semesters in which we never have enough time to include many of the genteel women writers we want, let alone another cadre and concept of literary production. But if the lack of effect was simply a casualty of "not enough time," we might, nonetheless, expect that scholarship would pick up the slack. Here too, there has been a puzzling silence. Only a handful of articles and monographs have taken up the project outlined by Hobby, Landry, and McDowell.⁴ Much of the problem lies with the fact that our ability, or often inability, to find evidence of non-elite culture challenges us to rethink the ways in which we generally carry out literary history, particularly the narrowly conceived and often fetishized sense that the literary text, or texts, constitute both the limit and the apotheosis of evidence. It is a challenge, moreover, that has wide-reaching implications for feminist scholarship generally.

Most of us are aware that evidence of non-elite culture is hard to come by. Throughout the eighteenth century, members of England's "commonality" possessed varying levels of literacy: some could read and write; far more could read, but *not* write. Additionally, the public forms of non-elite expression—petition, broadside, and ballad—were often irreducibly compromised by politi-

cal interests who ventriloquized the “commonality” to sway public opinion, so that apprentices’ petitions, to give one example, almost always have a dubious provenance. Add to this the fact that print evidence is unevenly preserved, and we are forced to confront the inevitable question of whether it is even possible to integrate print culture expressions of non-elite culture, never mind non-elite women, to our wider understanding of the eighteenth century. The short answer to this question is yes, it is possible, but not in conventional historiographic terms. That is to say, it is not possible to integrate expressions of non-elite women’s *subjectivity*, integrating evidence of non-elite women’s culture, however, requires only a small imaginative leap.

THE POLITICS OF HISTORIOGRAPHY AND THE SUBJECTIVE TURN

For the past hundred years or so, Euro-American historiography has been dominated by an intellectualized vision of the past that emerged from various members of the Frankfurt School (Max Weber, Jürgen Habermas, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Walter Benjamin). As Slavoj Žižek has pointed out, it is a vision largely divorced from the *politics* of European communism, though it retains an intellectual commitment to materialism.⁵ The reasons for this break are complicated and influenced both by shifts in Soviet-style communism as well as the looming specter of Nazi-style national socialism earlier in the twentieth century, each of which relied heavily on marshalling the social force of non-elite collectivity to vicious and appalling ends. Forged in the crucible of early and mid-century Europe, much of the Frankfurt School’s work on history is organized around the unresolved contradiction between a commitment to the social and a disavowal of collectivity. Later practitioners, particularly those who have most influenced eighteenth-century studies—E. P. Thompson and Raymond Williams—inherited this conflicted relationship to collectivity—a conflict they could resolve, as Paul Keen has shown, only by foregrounding heroic figures from working-class movements who simultaneously functioned as the face of non-elite collectivity and whose individuality forced their collective affiliations into the murky background.⁶ Inasmuch as Keen and others have become alert to the vexed relationship of their immediate predecessors with past iterations of collectivity and the need shared by Williams, Thompson, and others to engage with such iterations almost exclusively through the idiom of heroism, more recent historians themselves have been less aware of the extent to which this incipient anti-collectivism is at its origins misogynist.

THE BORDELLO OF HISTORY

Perhaps no philosopher of history so vividly illustrates the structuring influence of non-elite feminized collectivity on the practice of history than Benjamin.

On the eve of the Nazi occupation of Paris, Benjamin struggled to make a moral distinction between what he saw as historicism's misty-eyed infatuation with the past and historical materialism's rigor and precision. He wrote in his "On the Concept of History":

Historicism gives the "eternal" image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past. The historical materialist leaves it to others to be drained by the whore called "Once upon a time" in historicism's bordello. He remains in control of his powers, man enough to blast open the continuum of history.⁷

Benjamin's misogyny is, of course, breathtaking. Beyond that, however, what stands out most in this thesis is the historian qua hero's utter dependence upon his demonization of "historicism," understood as an account of the past that foregrounds continuity, as a bordello. It is, I would argue, no idle metaphor. Historical materialism, often rightly, has celebrated its rigor and meticulous ability to tease out the differences among past practices within the diachronic narrative of history—to document, for instance, that marriage during the Middle Ages was not the same as marriage in the nineteenth century. How ironic, then, that it is precisely Benjamin's inattention to the material realities of bordellos that leads him to an error of profound, though largely unchallenged magnitude, namely, that historical materialism's validity comes at the expense of a highly feminized non-elite collectivity. As Kathleen Davis puts the matter: "The 'eternal' image of the past is written on a woman and everyone has used her."⁸ Indeed, as Davis suggests it is not the prostitute's sexual dissidence that bothers Benjamin, but, on the contrary, the way in which she functions as a social adhesive. For inasmuch as History is what premodern and early modern England would have defined as a "common woman," she is made "common" both by her flagrant disregard of social status among her clients, and, more importantly, her self-transformation thereby into an instrument of collectivity. She becomes the "common" term that binds her clients together, while the bordello with its indiscriminate, promiscuous, and undifferentiated bodies comes to constitute the horizon of intelligibility for those of us working at the intersections of feminism and historically defined specializations. Insofar as this hostility underwrites a dominant, though perhaps not the only, version of historical materialism, it has undermined the production of new historical knowledges by feminism by deflecting its attention from other modalities of evidence and social constituencies that are not easily narrativized through the lives of individual writers, characters, or other singular historical figures—modalities that direct us towards affiliative and collective meaning.

ENTERING THE BAWDY HOUSE

Embracing the bawdy house as a metaphor of and material practice for constructing collectivity has radical potential not only for advancing a feminist

focus on non-elite culture only intermittently pursued thus far but also for rethinking the standards of evidence we use to reopen and reconstruct past and current fabrics of social formation. Indeed, the bawdy house as metaphor for historicist investigation is in many ways more apt for those of us working at the beginning of the twenty-first century than it was for Benjamin in the 1940s. In many ways, our world is not so different from Benjamin's, as we ourselves struggle to admit the existence and meaning of a variety of subsequent genocides; the bawdy house continues to function as the symbolic and literal place where we must engage the historically abject, non-elite, and subaltern, not on an individual, case-by-case basis, but collectively. For no period is this more true than the long eighteenth century.

During the Restoration and through most of the eighteenth century, the bawdy house was the only place where prostitution, understood as the exchange of sex for money, was *legally* visible because bawdy houses were illegal. Prostitution itself did not become illegal until the late eighteenth century. Indeed, any woman suspected of prostitution had to be prosecuted under a variety of other statutes that prohibited vagrancy: disturbing the peace, wandering at night, or participating in adultery and fornication, which the canon laws forbade. Though legally invisible, prostitution nonetheless functioned as the practical and imaginative adhesive that bound together a wide variety of illicit collectivities and modalities of representation.

The prostitute, or "common woman," is most easily accessed through popular print culture. Initially, she came to light as a metaphor for democratic collectivity in the 1640s, and our understanding of real and imagined prostitutes in the long eighteenth century is not separable from that early moment. Represented in the Mistress Parliament satires, the "common woman" epitomized what conservatives understood to be the unprincipled and promiscuous nature of those striving for a less elite foundation to political power. As the civil war years led to the Commonwealth, the Protectorate, and finally the Restoration, the prostitute retained her political valences. Inaugurating the tradition of what I have described elsewhere as political pornography, these satires were written almost exclusively by loyalists and invariably shared several key elements.⁹ They were usually published as broadsides or pamphlets, cheap and available to most members of the commonality, and they always focused on a group of women of the commons, usually from the lower trades, who had gathered together to gossip. By the end of the satire, the gossiping women have produced a manifesto in which the women articulate a series of demands regarding their own sexual liberty and their refusal to accept the yoke of subordination in their marriages. Using rhetoric clearly derived from radical documents like *The Agreement of the People* (1647) that pitted liberty against slavery, satires like the 1656 pamphlet *Now or Never: Or a new Parliament of Women Assembled And met to gether neer the Popes-Head in Moor-Fields, on the Back side of All-such* imagined these women proclaiming that, like their

brethren, "there is no reason we should be [men's] slaves, / We'll have our wills in spight of foolish Knaves."¹⁰

James Grantham Turner and Sharon Achinstein have each suggested that the prominence of "common women" within loyalist political pornography and sexual slander was a direct consequence of "real women" of the commons agitating for greater political rights, thereby threatening to turn the world upside down.¹¹ Certainly, women petitioners and sectarian women like Anna Trapnell, Katherine Chidely, Mary Overton, and Elizabeth Lilburne had achieved unprecedented levels of cultural visibility. In the main, however, very few pornographic satires focused on specific sectarian or radical women.¹² For what was at issue for loyalists was not the extraordinary actions of exceptional women, but rather the ordinary activities of ordinary women. As undifferentiated members of the commonality, these women's social position lent itself to a scandalous pun on the vernacular term for prostitute—"common woman."¹³ The pun was devastating not only because it sexually slandered women of the commons but also because it foregrounded the argument that networks and communities of women of the commons furthered interests that were often at odds with the interests of the state. As one 1660 pornographic satire put the matter, most members of the commonality are like "Fieri Facias the Upholsterer in Cornhill" who cannot decide whether he "Loves, Sack, Su: Leming, or the Subjects Liberty better."¹⁴ If pornographic satires fail to offer evidence of "real women," in the sense that they document how "real," non-elite women interacted or functioned, how do we interpret them? In what sense do they become intelligible and meaningful?

One of the most fascinating features of the mass-culture print representations is the way their social and political sensibilities become almost obvious when they are understood as part of a larger collective of representations. In addition to airing profound anxieties about the prospect of democratizing political power, they are, in short, out to undermine a means of establishing identity, common among the non-elite, in collective terms. Indeed, it is *only* in terms of prostitutes' relations to other people that anything like an identity emerges. The affiliations between modalities of evidence become starkly clear in the legal records that document instances where women engaging in prostitution were subject to legal interdiction.

Entries in the Middlesex Sessions Rolls were likely to look like the one for Elizabeth Noals:

On this 16th day of June 1660 cam John Pool of Bottolphs Aldgate, Chirgeon and Edward Maynard of Middlesex, Apothocary, And they did acknowledge to [us] this [day] ten pounds of lawful money of England to be levied and taken on those goodes and chattle land and tenements to the use of said sovereign lord Charles if Elizabeth Noals of Gyles in the ffields fails to perform the condition following. That the said Elizabeth Noals shall appear on this first day of the next sessions of

the peace to be holden for this county and answer for preferring folly and foolery and frequenting houses of ill fame in the mean tyme to be of good behavior.¹⁵

The fact that Noals is charged as an itinerant prostitute is not separable from the fact that Pool and Maynard were willing to post bail for her. Why, the recognizance does not say. We might speculate, though, that Noals was an occasional patient seeking treatment for various venereal diseases contracted in her line of work. But because all we have is a record of the allegation and not a record of her conviction, she might just as easily have been an honest woman maligned by someone, whose respectable neighbors leapt to her support. The point is that regardless of whether Noals did prefer “folly and foolery and frequenting houses of ill fame,” her identity is intelligible only in terms of her relationships with other people. Noals never speaks on her own behalf. Even if record of her testimony did survive, it too would have been intelligible only in terms of the collective agency described by her relationship with the magistrate and his scribe. Most records in both the sessions rolls and the minutes for Bridewell Hospital are similarly shaped. They include the woman’s name, the part of the city where she claims to reside, what she is accused of doing, where she was taken, her confederates, if any, and, in the case of Bridewell, her punishment. We know no more about her, in a way that has often been taken by scholars as evidence that it is impossible to know these non-elite women of the Restoration and early eighteenth century. Not only were they subliterate but also the scant records of their lives are frustratingly reticent. There is no “fiction in the archives,” to borrow Natalie Zemon Davis’s term.¹⁶ Yet, we know everything their culture tells us we need to know. As Laura Gowing has pointed out, non-elite women, “were likely to be recorded” as individuals “only in exceptional, usually negative circumstances.”¹⁷ Under these circumstances, institutions like the courts worked powerfully to re-anchor that individuality to the collectivity from which it had ruptured.

If feminism’s engagement with eighteenth-century culture has momentarily faltered, it has not done so from exhaustion. But a full engagement with non-elite culture requires a willingness to understand that such identities were understood as and continue to function in terms of collectivities. Consequently, their ability to be historically intelligible will only emerge through the collective operations of multiple modalities of evidence. The cultural, social, and literary history of non-elite women during the long eighteenth century can, I would argue, best be approached through a hermeneutics of collectivity wherein the meanings of cultural representations are understood to be intelligible only in conjunction with other modalities of evidence. As McDowell points out: “if women writers, printers, and publishers did not typically understand themselves in collective terms, others did. Augustan political and cultural elites recognized these women’s joint access to their culture’s most important mode of mass communication as a significant new threat to the established order, and

expended considerable energy working to shut down their voices in print."¹⁸ The evidence for and significance of that conflict lies not just in one text, but in myriad expressions across multiple contexts. These multiple modalities, in turn, bring us into desirable proximity with the writers we study, those whom those writers represent, the texts they produce, and the past and the present. Most importantly for feminism, a hermeneutics of collectivity does not erase the fact that most non-elite voices are forever lost; it does offer a tool for understanding why both historical and contemporary silences among collectivities of non-elite peoples remain meaningful.

NOTES

1. The trend was rendered most visible in George Levine's edited collection *Aesthetics and Ideology* (New Brunswick, 1994), wherein Levine complains about, among other things, the assumption that "all things are political and hence that the function of literature and literary study is primarily political" (2). He goes on to announce that, "having learned from literature itself many of the ideas and attitudes that now dominate the critical scene, and having cared too much for its extravagant power to shape and reshape experience and feeling, I am concerned now to join in efforts to rescue it from its potential disappearance into culture and politics" (3).

2. Marjorie Levinson, "What is New Formalism," *PMLA* 122, no. 2 (2007): 558–69.

3. In describing the essays included in the special issue *Eighteenth-Century Studies* devoted to showcasing the "best current work in feminism," Corrine Harrol and Kimberly Latta observe that the articles included therein "frequently locate within eighteenth-century texts themselves the kind of theoretical reflection that inspires their own feminist readings. This approach illuminates the philosophical and political self-consciousness—the presence of modes we call theory—within eighteenth-century texts themselves" ("Introduction," in "New Feminist Work in Epistemology and Aesthetics," ed. Harrol and Latta, special issue, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 39, no. 3 [2006]: 289–94, 291.)

4. Among these, I would include Toni Bowers, *The Politics of Motherhood: British Writing and Culture, 1680–1760* (Cambridge, 1996); Laura J. Rosenthal, *Infamous Commerce: Prostitution in Eighteenth-Century British Literature and Culture* (Ithaca, 2006); and Jennie Batchelor, "'Industry in Distress': Reconfiguring Femininity and Labor in the Magdalene House," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 28, no. 1 (2004): 1–20.

5. Slavoj Žižek, "From History and Class Consciousness to Dialectic of Enlightenment and Back," *New German Critique: An Interdisciplinary Journal of German Studies* 81 (2000): 107–23.

6. Paul Keen, *The Crisis of Literature in the 1790s: Print Culture and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, 1999).

7. Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" [1940], trans. Edmund Jephcott et al., *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938–1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, Mass., 2003), 388–400, 391.

8. Kathleen Davis, "Time Behind the Veil: The Media, the Middle Ages, and Orientalism," *The Postcolonial Middle Ages (The New Middle Ages)*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (New York, 2000), 105–22, 118.

9. Melissa Mowry, *The Bawdy Politic in Stuart England, 1660–1714: Political Pornography and Prostitution* (Aldershot, 2004).

10. *Now or Never: Or a new Parliament of Women Assembled And met to gether neer the Popes-Head in Moor-Fields, on the Back side of All-such* (London, 1656).

11. For more on this simplistic interpretation of political pornography from the period, see Sharon Achinstein, "Introduction" in "Gender, Literature, and the English

Revolution," special issue, *Women's Studies* 24, no. 1 (1994): 1–13; and James Grantham Turner, *Libertines and Radicals in Early Modern London: Sexuality, Politics, and Literary Culture, 1630–1685* (Cambridge, 2001). Women petitioners and other dissenters tended to use claims of equality as the premise of their arguments rather than as a goal towards which their arguments were working.

The real question that confronts us, I would argue, is, how do we think beyond the limits of historical difference without devolving into evolutionary and teleological narratives where past culture exists only as a pretext for present culture? As Margaret J. M. Ezell has pointed out, literary histories of women writers have tended to replicate narratives, often with incipient patriarchal assumptions, wherein the history of women's writing is the history of writing by elite and genteel women that works steadily toward full "literary" fruition in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: see *Writing Women's Literary History* (Baltimore, 1993). Happily, the assumptions about literary value were among the first casualties of early feminist work on literary history. More recently studies by Donna Landry (*Muses of Resistance: Laboring Class Women's Poetry in Britain, 1739–1796* [Cambridge, 1990]), Elaine Hobby (*A Virtue of Necessity: English Women's Writing, 1649–1688* [Ann Arbor, 1989]), and others have brought to light the fact that non-elite women also wrote in a variety of high-culture and vernacular forms, recognizing in Ezell's words that the "literary past is much more chaotic and diverse than we have previously implied in our literary histories" (164). Yet it is precisely the emphasis on the vernacular and non-elite culture that exposes the extent to which eighteenth-century studies has come to terms neither with the specter nor the epistemological implications of non-elite women.

12. For more on sectarian women's contribution to political discourse during the mid-seventeenth century, see Katharine Gillespie, *Domesticity and Dissent in the Seventeenth Century: English Women Writers and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, 2004). Both Achinstein and Turner have suggested that Stuart partisans focused their polemics on women because they felt threatened by the ways in which sectarian women in particular both advocated for and enjoyed equal rights. This seems to be at best an overstatement of the case. Most sectarian claims of equality were based on the doctrine of spiritual equality of men and women. Women's public speaking and political interventions were justified on the grounds that men and women were equally obligated to realize God's kingdom on earth. And while a doctrine of equal rights arguably might be extrapolated from sectarian women's writing, it was not an explicit objective (see Turner, 66–68).

13. On the history of the term "common woman," see Ruth Mazo Karras, *Common Women: Prostitution and Sexuality in Medieval Europe* (New York, 1998).

14. *Select City Queries: Discovering Several Cheats, Abuses and Subtilties of the City Bawds, Whore, and Trappanners* (London, 1660), 6.

15. Middlesex Sessions Rolls, MJ/SR—1214:235.

16. Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth Century France* (Stanford, 1990).

17. Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven, 2003), 10.

18. Paula J. McDowell, "Introduction: 'Strange and Unheard Revolutions,'" *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics, and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace 1678–1730* (New York, 1998), 1–22, 6.