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The Achievement of Scholarly Authority for Women: Trends in the Interpretation of Eighteenth-Century Fiction

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The 35th anniversary of the ASECS Women's Caucus offers an opportunity to celebrate the impact on eighteenth-century studies of scholarship produced by those who support and participate in the work of the Caucus. This essay joins that celebration by offering a broadly drawn sketch of some representative questions and methods that have emerged since the Caucus was founded in 1975, by observing trends in current work, and by broaching some predictions about directions that scholarly work by members of the Caucus might be expected to take in the future.¹

Over the past thirty-five years, scholarship by members of the Women's Caucus has been immense and varied—in fact, so immense and varied (and from such a variety of disciplinary contexts, theoretical positions, and scholarly investments, and in such a variety of formats) that no single essay could adequately recognize it all. For that reason, I make no effort at “coverage.” Instead, this essay will delineate broad trends that have characterized a small subset of Caucus members' work—book-length, gender-oriented interpretations of British prose fiction. This contracted focus reflects my own specialized interests and the limits of the essay form, not the true shape of what has been accomplished or some special representational function of gender-oriented scholarship on prose fiction. The richness of recent work in contexts not addressed here could provoke any number of essays similar to this one—and I hope it may do so.

The final three decades of the twentieth century witnessed the development of a number of new critical orientations committed to recognizing what Roxann Wheeler has called “categories of difference.”² Gender difference was among the earliest such categories to be addressed, and, by now, work that takes gender fundamentally into account has provided eighteenth-century studies with a vastly expanded set of textual objects and authorial personae, as well as new methods and purposes. This essay concentrates on that process of development.

Scholarship, like so much else, tends to proceed in fits and starts, according to the somewhat mysterious momentum of *trends*. Widespread interest in a new subject or method often builds from an initially slow response to new research that only gradually comes to influence other scholars' work. Pioneering scholars republish previously out-of-print primary texts; deploy innovative interpretive methods toward unlikely textual subjects; or produce provocative rubrics for previously overlooked or dismissed categories of writing, writers, textual production, or readers. When there has accrued what we might call a critical mass of this kind of groundbreaking research—enough to suggest a significant body of previously obscured work *and* to demonstrate the value of recovering and reading it *and* to suggest appropriate methods for interpreting it—scholarly focus shifts, first to recognize the existence of the new object or method of study, then to take it fully on board. Increasing numbers of scholars get interested; momentum grows. Subsequent critics build on the work that came before and over time, together, map out a new discipline.

Gender-oriented scholarship on eighteenth-century British fiction emerged in precisely this way. At first, such studies introduced a new subject unfamiliar to many scholars, even threatening to some. Gradually, through the efforts of unnumbered scholars over many years, long-lost eighteenth-century voices came to the attention of scholars and students—in academic journals and books, on course syllabi, and in scholarly editions on library shelves. Gender-oriented work on prose fiction became intellectually and professionally acceptable, then indispensable. By now, such studies have in their turn spawned further previously unthought directions for research.

THE 1970s AND 1980s

During the 1970s, in response to the wider women's movement, the research opportunities made plain by work such as John Richetti's *Popular Fiction Before Richardson* (1969) began to be exploited by scholars interested in expanding the canon to include women and other "others."³ Feminist scholars began to reassess the work of canonical figures such as Alexander Pope, Jonathan Swift, and Samuel Richardson, and to rethink the privilege many scholars still granted to printed *belles lettres* of the eighteenth century, a time of cacophonous verbal production. Among literary scholars, forms of writing not previously considered legitimate objects of study—many of them long associated with women writers and female readers, such as epistolary prose fiction, manuscript forms, scandalous memoirs, and Gothic fiction—began to receive serious scholarly attention for the first time.

A long-term, meticulous excavation of previously forgotten works by and about women began. Eighteenth-century women's texts, formerly available only in rare-book libraries, were reprinted by publishing houses sensing a promising new market. Those reprints, produced by such concerns as Scholars' Facsimiles

and Reprints and Garland Press, were the forerunners of crucial and long-lived editorial projects such as the Women Writers in English project from Oxford University Press and the Women Writers in English 1350–1850 Project at Brown University, projects that have done much to make available scholarly editions of understudied female writers. Even today's digitized archives of women's writing such as Cambridge University Press's Orlando Project owe something to those early reprints, primitive and poorly produced as they might seem today.

The 1970s also witnessed a renewed interest in the lives of women writers during the eighteenth century. To be sure, a few female authors' biographies had compelled unbroken fascination from the eighteenth century to the twentieth (Frances Burney, for instance). But many others who had been neglected now emerged as interesting subjects for biographical study. At times, in fact, 1970s and 1980s scholarship on eighteenth-century women authors was overly invested in biography, at least in the view of many later readers; nevertheless, those early biographical works, like the reprints that appeared alongside them, constituted crucial prerequisites for later study.

As scholars began the exhilarating task of restoring the lives and experiences of eighteenth-century women to prevailing historical accounts, they also worked to restore women's voices to the canon of British literature. Self-consciously foundational texts emerged, and primary authors now recognized as indispensable to the study of eighteenth-century prose fiction began to appear on university syllabi—including such now-towering figures as Aphra Behn, Eliza Haywood, Elizabeth Inchbald, Frances Burney, and Mary Wollstonecraft. Most important, perhaps, as scholars began to grapple seriously with women's writing rather than remaining fixated on life stories, new *kinds* of attention began to be paid to eighteenth-century women's writing. Gender-oriented scholars began vigorously to pursue a double project that has been going strong ever since: the project of uncovering eighteenth-century women's texts and offering sophisticated models for reading them.

I mentioned the women's movement as one reason for the tremendous increase of gender-oriented analyses during the 1970s and 1980s. Also of great importance to the developing methodological sophistication of gender-oriented criticism was the arrival of post-structuralist theories of language and meaning, Marxist theory, Foucauldian cultural critique, and other theoretically sophisticated tools—including especially feminist theory, itself a multiple phenomenon with many different purposes, points of origin, and cross-fertilizations. Theory infiltrated scholarly discussions of British women's prose fiction with some thoroughness during the 1980s, and has offered powerful interpretive engines ever since. In retrospect, it is clear that the combined momentum of ongoing archival discovery and theoretical/methodological innovation made possible the remarkable increase in highly sophisticated gender-oriented projects within eighteenth-century studies that took place during the 1980s and 1990s.

At the same time that they were discovering new theoretical models and

experimenting with the value of those models for the interpretation of eighteenth-century fiction, feminist scholars were actively reframing one of the most consistently debated issues in eighteenth-century literary history of the late twentieth century: the twin questions of the so-called “rise of the novel” and the novel’s relation to “romance.” Scholars of eighteenth-century literature had long given attention to mutations and formal developments across literary genres—in poetry and drama, for instance. But efforts to define the novel and locate its origins permeated eighteenth-century scholarship to an unprecedented extent during the last half of the twentieth century. Despite the fatigue some critics have expressed about the ongoing project, studies exploring the novel’s origins continue steadily to appear. And scholars of gender—several of whom made crucial interventions in the debate during the 1980s and 1990s (as the bibliography that follows this essay demonstrates)—have been among the most creative and influential voices.

What, these scholars ask, *were* eighteenth-century novels? To what extent were they different from the fiction that had come before, often called “romance”? How, why, and precisely when did the genre “novel” come into being? Ian Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel* catalyzed this discussion in 1957 and had extraordinary subsequent impact on the field, including gender-oriented scholarship.⁴ Watt’s influential arguments gave novels an indisputable place in the eighteenth-century curriculum (which had not always been the case before⁵), and made further search for the genre’s origins an undertaking attractive to subsequent researchers. It also produced a more equivocally positive result, helping to raise the novel’s status to its now seldom-questioned (though certainly arguable) place as the defining genre of eighteenth-century literary history. Sad to say, however, Watt gave no attention whatever to early female writers.

A corrective narrative emerged in the 1980s and has been refined continually for many years now. Today, there are a number of “rise of the novel” studies that consider the question with reference to eighteenth-century women’s important role in the historical development of the new genre, recasting the discussion of “the” novel’s “rise,” claiming peculiar and powerful generative functions for women’s voices and experiences, and providing theoretically informed models for analyzing prose fiction. To trace the history of gender-oriented scholarship on the “rise of the novel” debate (for instance) is to witness the generative power and tremendous productivity of feminist theorists and critics since the 1980s.

THE 1990s AND THE NEW CENTURY

The rediscovery and interpretation of eighteenth-century women’s fiction continued to galvanize eighteenth-century scholars during the 1990s. At the same time, over the course of that decade, scholars of gender became inter-

ested in related subjects. For example, they developed interest in their own most direct intellectual ancestors, eighteenth-century literary critics (many of whom, it turned out, were women). And there also emerged new studies of wider sociopolitical worlds: literary representations of women from beyond Anglo-American or French shores received great attention, for instance, as did voices from outside the privileged classes. Increasingly during the 1990s and in the first years of the present century, new generations of interpreters have furthered such research, greatly benefiting from the labors of gender-oriented researchers from the 1970s and 1980s.

The 1990s saw a tremendous growth of scholarship on a great many explicitly gendered subjects that just ten or fifteen years earlier might have been considered too “marginal” to justify book-length studies. Books appeared on the Bluestocking circle, on eighteenth-century women’s participation in commerce as shoppers, on early eighteenth-century women’s scandalous “amatory” fictions, and on the importance of women’s writing to the late-century cult of sensibility. Eighteenth-century women’s participation in or resistance to various eighteenth-century economies (of money; of the trade in slaves; of literary publication and distribution; of beauty, fashion, the heterosexual imperative and the marriage “market”; of misogyny, partisanship, personal identity, aesthetics, artistic inheritance, and social prestige) became topics of intense scholarly interest. The eighteenth-century meanings of patriarchal authority and power came under increasingly sophisticated scrutiny in a variety of contexts (heterosexual courtship, father-daughter relations, maternal authority), as did eighteenth-century debates over women’s education, women’s friendships, motherhood, old age, experiences with the law and foreign travel, and lesbian culture—debates that were often staged in fiction. Difficult as it may be to believe for those new to the profession today, few of these subjects of book-length analysis from the 1990s would have seemed appropriate for publication before the ascendance of gender studies that took place and accelerated during the previous two decades. By the 1990s, gender studies’ time had undoubtedly come.

By the end of the 1990s, literary scholarship had begun to move away from the pattern that had dominated during the late twentieth century, in which scholars would share interest, over extended periods, in particular interpretive models (formalism, then structuralism, then post-structuralism, Marxism, new historicism; the scheme is crude, but it reflects a general truth). Instead, scholars began to mark out multiple, simultaneous, and often identity-driven platforms for analysis. This trend has for several years now been evident in the writing of eighteenth-century gender-oriented scholars. Today, their scholarship often overlaps with queer studies, for example, with consideration of concerns such as race and ethnicity that were once thought of as separate from gender, and with investigations that combine disciplines formerly considered distinct: legal studies and literary studies, for instance, or political history and studies of physical space, or questions about gender and nationality/nation formation.

New trends continue to emerge. Interest in the material history of texts has dramatically gained momentum in recent years, and once again gender scholars have been at the forefront of the developing field. This developing focus is yielding fascinating new work on the reading habits, assumptions, and expectations of eighteenth-century readers, and on the quotidian facts and everyday processes that made literary production and distribution possible.

Part of the process of the new “globalization” of eighteenth-century studies has been an increasing overlap between cultural historians, whose investigative efforts can center on any of a number of traditional disciplines (literature, art, music, performance), and historians per se, as traditionally defined. In the work of many individual scholars, it is growing more and more difficult to tell the disciplinary difference. Despite some methodological bumps and the occasional turf battle, this move toward a disciplinarily more-inclusive idea of “the” eighteenth century is turning out to be productive and salutary. And, it is worth pointing out, the foundational assumptions of global eighteenth-century studies are grounded in the necessarily interdisciplinary and difference-championing nature of gender studies. It is fair to say, indeed, that the kind of scholarship produced from within the Women’s Caucus has provided the intellectual ground and cleared the theoretical space that makes possible much innovative new work—scholarship that questions and refines traditional distinctions between public and private spheres, for instance, as well as scholarship of the Atlantic and/or Pacific eighteenth-centuries and, more generally, of geographic, linguistic, or racial “others” in the imaginations of eighteenth-century Anglophones.

Today it would be impossible to account adequately for even the rigorously delimited subset we began with, gender-oriented studies of eighteenth-century British fiction. But one thing is indisputable: such work shares a debt to the pioneering labor of scholars over the past thirty-five years, who made possible today’s substantial engagement with once-shadowy figures such as Jane Barker, Delarivier Manley, Mary Davys, Maria Edgeworth, Sarah Fielding, Charlotte Lennox, Susan Ferrier, Hannah More, Ann Radcliffe, Charlotte Smith, Mary Robinson, and Mary Hays. *Every one* of these now well-known writers, like the even better-known novelists mentioned above, went virtually unread before late twentieth-century critics restored them to readers. And the interpretive writing generated by those recovery efforts has consistently offered richer understandings of eighteenth-century culture per se. It would be difficult, in short, to overestimate the influence on present-day scholarship of the efforts of the members of the ASECS Women’s Caucus during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, and in the first years of the present century.

But those efforts are by no means complete, and this author, among others, has recently warned against a premature solidifying of the canons of eighteenth-century women writers. It is crucial, of course, for a body of critical discourse to build up around particular texts; this is part of what it means for texts (and

their authors) to enter the canon. But students of eighteenth-century fiction by and about women must not be content to interpret and re-interpret the same texts. Archival investigation remains an important undertaking. Scholars must continue to augment familiar canons and uncover works by still-neglected or unknown writers. It is to be hoped that neither the great gains already made, nor the convenience of electronic resources (which though vast are unlikely ever to be truly comprehensive or universally available), will slow the pace of archival investigation over the coming decades or bring premature closure to the recovery project.

After more than three decades of concerted effort, then, members of the ASECS Women's Caucus have succeeded in restoring to visibility the work of a great many eighteenth-century women. Together we have expanded the boundaries of scholarship to include women's lives and experiences; developed tools appropriate for the interpretation of this new body of work; and as this essay's bibliography suggests, produced an astounding quantity of scholarship. This picture is not entirely rosy, however. Too often, recent editions of even indisputably major eighteenth-century works by women fall quickly out of print. As I write, it is possible to order more than a dozen reasonably priced, professionally edited, student-friendly editions of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*; *Crusoe* is also easy to obtain as an audio book. How many reasonably priced, professionally edited, student-friendly editions of Behn's *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* or Manley's *New Atalantis* are available to our students? *Not one*. Pressure on publishers to take texts out of circulation is likely to remain intense, and needs to be counterbalanced by a steady demand from scholar-teachers. We must order one another's editions in numbers great enough to justify keeping women's titles in print. As a collective, the members of the ASCES Women's Caucus need to use our leverage to make and keep available affordable, well-edited classroom editions of eighteenth-century women's work.

And although there is reason to rejoice at the number of female scholars producing pioneering work in the study of eighteenth-century fiction, it remains the case that too many of the books listed in the bibliography below were produced under difficult material circumstances by overburdened female academics whose career paths have been, to say the least, arduous. Many of the works that appear here (and some that still do not appear though they have been long-awaited) are unnecessarily delayed because of institutional structures that continue to put unequal pressure on academic women and to support their work inequitably when it comes to prestigious research fellowships and institutional Chairs.⁶ The shadows of lost possibility and postponed achievement lurking between the lines of this essay's bibliography reflect entrenched habits of all sorts, and include the idiosyncratic vagaries of various institutions; individual circumstances vary widely. The ASECS Women's Caucus has for some time recognized that peculiar challenges face women scholars. It has devoted resources toward support for gender-oriented graduate students and for archi-

val work; such support will be among the Caucus's most important activities going forward.

Finally, it may be worth mentioning a trend that has recently begun to be observed by some of the most distinguished scholars of gender in our time: a perceived tendency among younger critics of eighteenth-century literature to revisit assumptions that their gender-oriented predecessors once labored to leave behind—for instance, the notion that it is possible to discuss literature from a gender-neutral position or as a closed system largely without reference to historical particularity and change. These concerns are not, of course, shared by everyone. Nevertheless, it seems necessary to respect them, and to consider the likelihood, at this juncture, of a reduced constituency or momentum for gender studies, or of female writers of the eighteenth century losing their still-tenuous hold on canonical status.

It seems to me unlikely that work focused on women's writing, or even scholarship from an overtly feminist point of view (a perhaps more threatened subspecies), will become less central to eighteenth-century studies any time soon, especially if scholars continue the work of unearthing, editing, publishing, interpreting, and teaching feminocentric texts. A great many issues remain unresolved; many others are still emerging. There is a lot of work still to be done. Furthermore, while global studies, disability studies, subaltern studies, queer studies, and material studies might, from certain vantage points, seem to be *competing with* gender studies as points of entry to eighteenth-century studies and focuses of attention for scholarship, these new perspectives might better be seen as natural *outgrowths* of the gender-oriented work of Caucus members, likely to share (as indeed, they have emerged from) the methods, assumptions, purposes, and emphases that have driven the achievements of more than three decades of scholarship.

Gender studies, after all, has not only taught eighteenth-century scholars to notice this or that individual writer (though it does make that demand, and will continue to do so). It has also taught scholars to ask previously unthought *kinds* of questions, to give careful attention to previously unregarded *categories* of materials, and to listen closely to previously silenced *groups* of voices. This has constituted nothing less than a methodological (some would say, ideological) revolution, one that is still going strong. One step in that revolution's progress has been the recognition that gender per se is merely one "category of difference," in Wheeler's felicitous phrase. It is the continuing, expanding recognition of such categories (and of the particular demands each makes on interpreters) that will take eighteenth-century studies into the future.

The historical and ongoing contributions of gender scholarship to eighteenth-century studies are unlikely to be foreclosed by new kinds of work, I think, but gender studies may well be changed by developing interpretive trends—as it should be. After all, difference *includes* gender difference, but does not stop there. Groundbreaking scholarship in the future can be expected to take fully on board a recognition of a number of crucial differences—those made by location, historical position, language, culture, age, rank, ethnicity, politics, material

circumstances, and patterns of economic distribution, for instance—in addition to gender difference. No single scholar or cohort will be able to dictate the terms of such discussions: it will be more important than ever to maintain these kinds of dialogues across disciplinary boundaries that ASECS has championed. After all, it is at the level of the most fundamental assumptions and procedures that gender-oriented scholarship has made a lasting impact on eighteenth-century studies, and it will be at the same level that this scholarship will change and develop in the future, in response to new challenges.

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NOTES

1. For pertinent relations among the related (but not synonymous) terms “gender studies,” “women’s studies,” and “feminist studies,” see Toni Bowers, “Gender Studies and Eighteenth-Century British Literature,” *Literature Compass* 4, no. 4 (2007): 935–66, esp. 935–37; Betty A. Schellenberg, “Writing Eighteenth-Century Women in Literary History, 1986–2006,” *Literature Compass* 4, no. 6 (2007): 1538–60..

2. Roxann Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race: Categories of Difference in Eighteenth-Century British Culture* (Philadelphia, 2000).

3. John J. Richetti, *Popular Fiction before Richardson: Narrative Patterns 1700–1739* (Oxford and New York, 1969; rept. 1992).

4. Ian P. Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding* (Berkeley, 1957).

5. See W. B. Carnochan, "'A Matter Discutable': The Rise of the Novel," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 12, nos. 2–3 (2000): 167–84.

6. For continued gender discrimination in the awarding of fellowships, see Michèle Lamont, *How Professors Think: Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009), 222.