

Review Article

Writing Women in(to) the Long Eighteenth Century

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Isobel Armstrong and Virginia Blain (eds), *Women's Poetry in the Enlightenment: The Making of a Canon, 1730–1820*, Macmillan, 1999, pp. xvi + 226, £42.50; Vivien Jones (ed.), *Women and Literature in Britain, 1700–1800*, Cambridge University Press, 2000, pp. xi + 320, £37.50, £13.95 pb; Rachel Weil, *Political Passions: Gender, the Family and Political Argument in England, 1680–1714*, Manchester University Press, 1999, pp. ix + 262, £45.

One of the most significant developments in eighteenth-century studies over the past fifteen years or so has been the attention paid to women's lives in general, and to women's writing in particular. The rescue of women from 'the enormous condescension of posterity' has been both exciting and challenging. Above all, it has been a multi-disciplinary project involving, amongst others, historians, literature specialists, art historians, and historians of science and medicine, which has required them to work together and to find points of contact in pursuit of their common concerns. The concentration on women's writing (broadly understood) is not surprising. It has largely been through the careful reading of previously unstudied letters, diaries and autobiographies written by women (as well as the study of their more self-consciously literary outputs such as novels, plays and poems) that we can begin at least to hear the lost voices of women in the past. This has meant that the recovery of women's writing has had an impact on historical as much as on literary studies. For literature specialists, the impetus for much recent work came from several significant publications in the 1980s: Roger Lonsdale's *The New Oxford Book of English Verse* (1984), his *Eighteenth-Century Women Poets: An Oxford*

Anthology (1989), which showed to a wider audience that there was much more to eighteenth-century poetry than Pope and Wordsworth, and the *Dictionary of British and American Women Writers, 1660–1800* edited by Janet Todd (1987), which gave information on nearly 600 women writers. Historians, too, have been interested in writing by women. Those important books by Catherine Hall and Leonore Davidoff, *Family Fortunes. Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (1987), Amanda Vickery, *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (1998) and Amanda Foreman, *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire* (1998) were, in their very different ways and from different perspectives, to a great extent based on women's writings, especially their letters and diaries. The consequences of uncovering and analysing this material have been immense, opening up new topics for discussion, changing syllabi at university level to reflect the growth of texts and topics, and testing (indeed often challenging) some of our assumptions about the age and its priorities. But how successful have we been in writing women into the long eighteenth century?

The publication of the three books under review show-cases some of the fruits of the most recent research into the field, and will certainly be of benefit to both historians and literature specialists. The first two are collections of essays devoted to aspects of women's writing and represent work predominantly from departments of English literature. It is significant that they are multi-authored since the whole enterprise of discovering eighteenth-century women has of necessity been a collaborative project. These collections avowedly want to make a contribution to the growing scholarship on women's writing (although it is true that a couple of essays in both volumes could be placed within the camp of gender studies). The third book is single-authored by an historian whose main focus complements the interests of the other books, but also significantly departs from them in that it takes gender rather than women *per se* as its major concern. Taken together, however, they offer an opportunity to reflect on what we have learned from the explosion of research into this subject and to highlight some of the issues involved in studying writing by and about women in the period.

The project of recovering women's writing has taken (and is taking) various stages. A preliminary (and still on-going) stage, and the pre-requisite for all else that follows, is the finding and cataloguing of material written by women. Many new women authors have been discovered, or rather re-discovered, since the publishing history of a number of women explored in the books under review indicates that they were well-known in their own time before being marginalised and forgotten by later generations. Indeed the two collections of essays both proclaim that part of their rationale is to record this new material, and Isobel Grundy's essay in the collection edited by Vivien Jones gives a brief overview of how eighteenth-century women's writing was rediscovered in the twentieth century. A second stage is to ask whether there was anything distinctive about women's writing in the period (both in terms of

what made eighteenth-century women's writing different from seventeenth- or nineteenth-century writing, and in the sense of a difference between men's and women's writing). Kate Lilley's essay in the Armstrong and Blain collection on the ways in which early eighteenth-century women used the Georgic verse epistle to exemplify a female sociality which critiqued and departed from male homosociality is interesting in this regard and makes a contribution to this debate. In similar fashion, Stuart Curran, in a stimulating essay on Romantic women poets in the same collection, argues that there is often a danger that the newly-discovered women's voices will be accommodated to a paradigm drawn and enacted by men. But this opens up the large question of how far women stood outside the dominant culture or how far in fact they were participants within it. At the moment different scholars answer this question in different ways. A third level of question is to ask, even if there were different styles of writing between men and women, were those differences imposed or chosen, and how far were they complicated by issues such as status, religion, age, and region? Several essays in these volumes in fact suggest that there were as many differences between writings by women as there were between men's and women's writings. For example, in the Jones collection, Harriet Guest interestingly probes what might be meant by femininity in the period, and, through a case study of Anna Barbauld shows how, even within the limits of one individual, its meaning could be heavily contested. In the same volume Felicity Nussbaum explores the ways in which issues of race in texts written by or about women also complicate discussions about simple binary differences.

It is perhaps not surprising that a number of authors have contributed to both essay collections although it is slightly disturbing to feel that in some cases essays could have been placed in either volume, which suggests that there is a slight lack of focus and shape about the collections as a whole. What is more frustrating is that the contributors to these volumes seem to be pre-occupied with what amounts to a fairly small list of women writers. Despite all the talk of uncovering the great variety of women writers from the period, one could be forgiven for thinking that in practice there were only a couple of dozen women authors in the whole of the eighteenth century. The familiar names of Mary Astell, Anna Barbauld, Elizabeth Carter, Susanna Centlivre, Ann Finch, Eliza Haywood, Mary Leapor, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, Hannah More, Ann Radcliffe, Elizabeth Rowe, Sarah Scott, Anna Seward, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Ann Yearsley recur time and again throughout the two volumes, so that it comes as a refreshing change to read in the Armstrong and Blain collection Roger Sales's short study of literary philanthropy in York which details the relationship between the two unknowns (at least to me) Charlotte Richardson and Catherine Cappe, and David Shuttleton's account of the relatively obscure Bath poet Mary Chandler. There is a certain irony in the fact that both these essays are written by men. What is going on here? Why has no more attention been paid to

the hundreds of other women writers listed in Todd's *Dictionary*? Are the women writers favoured for study deemed to be more interesting, more important or more influential than the others, or, is it as one suspects, that there is still a great deal more work to be done in finding out about and analysing the writing of the lesser-known figures? Whatever the reason, there seem to be a real danger that the women writers most often studied are forming a new canon which, as much as the older male canon, is already marginalising the voices of other women from the past.

Of the two essay collections, Jones's is the most coherent and the most original. The title accurately reflects the contents of the volume as this is about the different relationships between women and literature. Essays explore women not only as writers, but also as printers, buyers and consumers of literary products. Something of the rich variety of women's writing is surveyed in Clare Brant's overview essay (which could more usefully have been placed at the start rather than at the end of the volume). Jones's broad understanding of what is meant by literature ensures that she has brought together contributions on a range of literary styles, although it could be argued that the number of forms and genres could be even wider. It is a pity that more attention is not paid to the letters, journals, diaries and autobiographies written by women in the period since arguably through these genres most women put pen to paper in the eighteenth century. The collection – although necessarily focussing on individuals – is organised around types of writing, and this encourages contributors to make some wider judgements that will be useful for students studying the period.

Each of the essays in this volume makes some useful points. Gillian Skinner argues that women's exclusion from citizenship did not necessarily preclude their having a public life although it is not clear from her essay what role women's writing played in this. Ruth Perry observes that sometime early in the eighteenth century there was a significant shift as the biological family came to be seen as gradually secondary to the chosen family. Her chapter examines novels written largely by women that took as their central theme the disinheriting of daughters and the development of strict settlement, although perhaps tellingly the author who explores this most fully was Samuel Richardson. Ros Ballaster explores the trope whereby women self-consciously wrote about the secondariness of women while, perhaps in anticipation of Jane Austen, at the same time their novels asserted the primacy of female agency. Margaret Doody provides us with a useful overview of the different types of poetry written by women. Angela Smallwood's chapter on women and the theatre focuses on what actually happened on stage, and thereby makes a significant contribution to the history of performance. Dianne Dugaw looks at the role of gender in popular culture and highlights the challenges to class-based ideals of femininity and domesticity. One interesting feature of the essay – and indeed this occurs in the other volumes under consideration – is the ways in which some women writers, such as

Mary Astell and Hannah More, were inspired by and sustained by religious and Christian ideals. This is a salutary reminder that, despite the fact that so much of the recent emphasis on women's writing and women's behaviour has focussed on secular activities and the new worlds of pleasure that existed in the period, there were other opportunities and priorities open to women. Kathryn Sutherland's elegant discussion of conduct books takes a fresh look at women's contribution to that genre. In particular, she wants to stress the positive effects of conduct books (which are usually seen as constricting). She argues that, for some women writers, Christian priorities could be seen as equipping women with the necessary independence of judgement for them to play a role in the world. In some ways those essays which deal not with literary texts themselves but with the production and consumption of literature are the most impressively researched. Paula McDowell's important essay on women printers makes a valuable contribution to the field and Jan Fergus's painstaking account of booksellers' lists complicates our assumptions about women and reading. Novels, she concludes, were not as popular as we might imagine, or at least not in the Midlands, and the literary tastes of men and women of all classes were not as different as some of the models of readership assume. *The Lady's Magazine* was, for instance, dependent on male readers.

If Jones's collection is based around the variety of ways in which women engaged with literature, and is thus broadly thematic in content, Armstrong's and Blain's collection is focussed more on individual writers. In some ways this means that this is a more disparate volume. Something of the lack of overall shape is indicated by the two-headed title which rather gives the impression that some of the essays are about aspects of the Enlightenment and others are about canon formation, but the connection between the two has not always been thought through. It is not clear for example, what resonance the word Enlightenment is supposed to have for this collection. How far is this meant to be a period label or should it rather be seen as a movement within that period? Nor is it really explained what the term Enlightenment means, and contributors understand it in very different ways. Nevertheless there are some interesting essays, and the collection is distinguished by some particularly acute close reading. Margaret Doody examines the theme of sensuousness in eighteenth-century women's poetry and argues that women empathised with nature. Lisa Freeman looks at Elizabeth Carter's 'A Dialogue' to explore the conditions under which the female mind could be free to pursue a life of thought. Isobel Grundy investigates the anonymous author of 'An Original Essay on Women' and highlights the poem's stress on the importance of systematic thought and reason. Mary Waldron rehearses the well-known dispute between Ann Yearsley and Hannah More, and Judith Hawley analyses Charlotte Smith's *Elegaic Sonnets*. Of particular interest are Anne K. Mellor's unpicking of the two traditions of 'the female poet' and 'the poetess', and Elizabeth Eger's exploration of the ways in which women poets were

anthologised in the period. However, perhaps the most original essay is Maggie Favretti's excellent study of Anna Barbauld's poem 'Eighteen Hundred and Eleven' which prophesied the end of the British Empire as a result of gentlemanly failure to fully comprehend the complexities of rule.

Rachel Weil's important study echoes some of the themes of the first two books and, although single-authored, it also resembles the other books in form since it is in many ways a collection of case-studies. This is perhaps the book's most obvious weakness in that it lacks a completely coherent overall vision or argument. Nevertheless, Weil's book is highly distinctive. In the first place, it is the most overtly political of the books under review, placing the high political events of 1680 to 1714 centre stage. This is in itself significant. Weil's contribution is to bring together studies of gender and studies of high politics, since both were ultimately about power, and to show how events such as the exclusion crisis and the Glorious Revolution and its aftermath interacted with thinking about gender. In doing this, Weil has certainly broken new ground and she deserves immense credit for bringing together areas of study which have been previously kept apart. Too often it has been assumed that women's writing and indeed women's history were tangential to the male-dominated world of high politics but, as she shows, the reverberations of the events of 1688–89 were wide-ranging. The premise of Weil's book is that both men and women in the period made connections between the family and the state and between marriage vows and political allegiance. She argues that it was often in political discussions that ideas about gender were shaped and formed and that political history needs to include the history of gender. The challenge of the book is to see how the language of politics and the language of gender inter-related.

Weil is quick to point out that the connections between the political and gender issues could be slippery; there were, for instance, no inherently Whig or Tory views on gender. Indeed she shows that the most dramatic gender differences were not between Whig and Tory but between Williamite Tories and Jacobites. Her book raises some large questions: did people use political arguments as a way of talking about gender issues, how did political arguments become connected to those of gender, and how did interest groups use controversy over gender relations to legitimate themselves politically? Moreover, what was the relationship between the uses of images of the family and marriage in political argument and actual family life? These are huge questions and Weil should be given credit for raising them, if ultimately she cannot answer them.

Weil's book is rich and suggestive and covers a great amount of interesting material. In so doing, it sheds light on the writings of a diverse range of people, from Whig polemicists through to writers on divorce, and to the novelist Delaviere Manley. Perhaps the most successful chapters are those case studies which examine the political writings of Mary Astell, representations of Queens Mary and Anne, and the self-image of Sarah Churchill, the

Duchess of Marlborough. Astell, who figures in both the other books under review, becomes for Weil a prime example of the complexity of the relations between gender and political issues. As a convinced Tory, Astell used her political writings to challenge gender inequality and gender relations as they existed under the Whig regime, attacking male citizens who opposed tyranny in the State but who continued to exercise it at home.

As an interim report on the impact of a decade or so of research then, these books indicate that while much has been gained there is still much to be done in studying women writers in the eighteenth century. Further research, it might be suggested, needs to learn from some of the limitations of these studies, as well as benefit from their findings. In particular, we need to encourage much more research on a wider variety of women writers, to break through the glass ceiling that limits serious study to the well-known names. We need to broaden out what we mean by literature and writing to include all forms of the written word and not privilege the overtly literary. Perhaps even more fundamentally (and more controversially) we need to find strategies (as Weil has attempted to do) to write women back into the broader political and social worlds of the eighteenth century. A collection of essays devoted to that theme might well now be timely.