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CHAPTER 1

Manly words on Mount Parnassus

> Women we have often eagerly placed *near* the throne of literature: if they seize it, forgetful of our fondness, we can hurl them from it.
>
> *Critical Review*[1]

Eighteenth-century British writers metaphorically represent literary excellence as a throne or mountain, indicating a place of honor raised above the hordes of undistinguished writers. Exactly who gains access to that hallowed ground forms the subject of earnest debate throughout the period. The terms of the controversy reflect the configurations of power in critical authority, and the discourse of gender frequently supplies a language of definitive polarities.

In *The Battle of the Books* (*c.* 1697, 1704), Jonathan Swift memorably demonstrates the utility of gendered codes in the figure of Criticism, a composite of bestial and misogynist imagery who champions the Moderns over the Ancients in the contest for Mount Parnassus.

> The goddess herself had claws like a cat; her head, and ears, and voice, resembled those of an ass; her teeth fallen out before, her eyes turned inward, as if she looked only upon herself; her diet was the overflowing of her own gall; her spleen was so large, as to stand prominent, like a dug of the first rate; nor wanted excrescencies in form of teats, at which a crew of ugly monsters were greedily sucking.[2]

On the one hand, the image stimulates revulsion toward Criticism by distorting the creature's female body in beastly analogues with supernumeraries unmodestly exposed. On the other, Swift simultaneously invests her with pettiness, confirming feminine stereotypes of the goddess as vain and splenetic. By casting this new form of writing as vile coquette, Swift equates literary criticism with a frightening version of

[1] *Critical Review*, second series, vol. 5 (1792): 132.
[2] Jonathan Swift, *The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift, D.D.*, ed. Temple Scott, 12 vols. (London: G. Bell and Sons, Ltd., 1919), vol. 1, p. 175.

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his culture's most trivial character. Capitalizing on persistent anxieties surrounding female sexuality, Swift registers the threat of modern criticism and yet immediately neutralizes its force through implications of indecency and inferiority. In this way, Swift connects the illegitimacy of the goddess' reign with her grotesque femaleness; the success of the satire relies on the vilification of the feminine implicit in the organization of his society.

The sexuality of the creature becomes a greater focal point of fear in the description of Criticism's children, "Noise and Impudence, Dulness and Vanity, Positiveness, Pedantry, and Ill-manners," the result of an incestuous relationship with Ignorance, her father.[3] The den of Criticism, for Swift, is pointedly not the productive scene of writing; instead, he describes the activity as exaggerated gestation in which the offspring allegorize the omnipresence and vulgarity of modern judgment. Yet the goddess possesses an insidious power that lies in her exclusively female capacity to breed. The repulsive female body serves as a sign and a site for the cultural reproduction of monstrous falsehoods; conversely, the source of modern literary criticism is feminized and reviled as corrupt and uncontained. The allegory stigmatizes both the female body and modern criticism as dangerous cultural waste. The stakes in this debate become clear in Criticism's self-aggrandizing soliloquy, culminating in the preposterous claim: " 'Tis I who have deposed wit and knowledge from their empire over poetry, and advanced myself in their stead."[4] Swift represents the goddess herself as a pretender to the throne of poetry, advancing the modern errors of independence, complacency, and endless production. In ironic contrast, Swift upholds "wit and knowledge" as the founding authority of poetry, a position elaborated by the proponents for the Ancients. Thus, the language of gender invigorates Swift's polemic. Through the association with gross femininity, Swift impugns the critical output of his predominantly male contemporaries, engaging a semiotics of gender to convey a range of culturally specific meanings in defense of established literary authority.

Swift's personification highlights two relevant aspects of the history of literary criticism: first, the practice of criticism proliferated in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, forming a part of a contested discussion about what was knowable, what was worth knowing, and who was authorized to know; and, second, gender was an explicit and fundamental part of that literary discourse. At the heart of the debate

[3] Ibid. [4] Ibid., p. 176.

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over Ancients and Moderns is the question of how one determines literary value. Throughout the long eighteenth century in Britain, the balance of this contest shifts from the classical to the modern, or what in retrospect we have labeled the Romantic. Ironically, by 1798 modified versions of the qualities that Swift attacks – autonomy, confidence, and excess – become the hallmarks of the Romantic poet. The proliferation of literary criticism during this period is in part fueled by the challenge to prevailing literary ideals and the persistent desire to protect established value from change.

At every point in this history, however, gender plays a complex and significant role. The language of gender enters the critical discussion of the Restoration and eighteenth century in numerous places, in metaphor or allegory, in models of hierarchy, in descriptive phrases, and prescriptive measures. At the most basic level, gender provides an everyday vocabulary through which the critic constructs literary distinctions. In these ways the discourse of gender informs, shapes, and, in part, enables early British literary judgment. Cultural designations of masculinity and femininity, which change over the course of this history, form part of a matrix of discourses through which this specialized literary knowledge is articulated. Assessments of literary value engage the hegemonic discourse in multiple and intricate ways. In short, gender is a constitutive element of eighteenth-century literary criticism.

Where they meet, neither literary value nor gender can be properly understood without reference to the other. The discussion of literary criticism and the consideration of gendered differences, both of which expand greatly during the eighteenth century, are at many points thoroughly bound together; thus Dryden labels Virgil "manly" and assumes his audience understands its significance. The *Spectator* contains essays on the beauties of *Paradise Lost* along with advice on ladies' hoop skirts, and John Bennett advises young girls to read Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry On the Sublime and the Beautiful* in order to acquire those very traits.[5] Because distinctions of literary worth are often articulated through cultural constructions of gender, the formal as well as the moral criteria of literature correspond with specific, historical gendered constructions. During the period 1660–1790, the reigning organization of society is patriarchal, by which I mean that the right to exercise all official forms of power – governmental, economic, legal, domestic, etc. – belongs first and foremost to the male subject and only to the female by default or

[5] John Bennett, *Letters to a Young Lady on a Variety of Useful and Interesting Subjects, Calculated to Improve the Heart, to Form the Manners, and Enlighten the Understanding*, ninth American edition (New York, 1827), p. 172.

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exigency.[6] Literary criticism appropriates a wide range of patriarchal images and conventions in justification of its hierarchy of literature. Not surprisingly, as Virginia Woolf notes of a later period, "it is the masculine values that prevail."[7] The importance of "masculine" art always takes precedence over the "feminine," although the configuration shifts as the model of gender relations in society changes. Moreover, while the critical construction of gender admits some permutation over the course of a hundred and thirty years, the discourse regularly restricts certain privileges, like judgment and intellect, as masculine, effectively protecting them from female encroachment.

The prevalence of the word "manly" as a critical term of approbation and "effeminate" as a term of reproach testifies to the consistent privileging of "masculine" values over a category distinguished as not masculine, whether it is feminine or unmanly. Correspondingly, Addison praises "those rational and manly Beauties" of Milton, while Samuel Cobb discovers in Longinus "the expression of free, generous and manly spirit," and Joseph Warton describes Pope's genius for "solid and manly observations on life or learning."[8] Beyond signifying a sense of admiration for the writer, the term "manly" offers a rather nebulous meaning. These critics associate the word with a series of qualifiers that suggest different shades of import. Addison's phrasing modifies the "Divine Work" of *Paradise Lost* and suggests an intellectual and lyrical excellence achieved by the learned poet. Cobb's depiction of the sublime invokes an energetic, boundless male imagination, unrestrained by the chaste codes of behavior required of women. Warton indicates a worldliness in Pope's writing that might be beyond the scope of the poetic but is still dignified. In each example, the usage of "manly" evokes a world-view or experience that is gendered by a historical, social construction of the gentleman.

Despite its ambiguity, the word "manly" conveys a sense of universal masculine privilege that Fielding mocks in *Joseph Andrews* (1742). In a chapter entitled "A discourse between the poet and the player; of no other use in this history but to divert the reader," two thugs analyze

[6] See Michael McKeon's article, "Historicizing Patriarchy: The Emergence of Gender Difference in England, 1660–1760," for an analysis of the dynamic of male dominance in the societal shift from aristocratic to bourgeois manifestations of authority: *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 28.3 (1995), 295–322.

[7] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own.* (San Diego, New York, and London: Harvest/HBJ, 1929), p. 77.

[8] Joseph Addison and Richard Steele, *The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, 5 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), vol. III, p. 530; Cobb quoted in Samuel H. Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England*, second edition (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1960), p. 27; Joseph Warton, *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Pope* (London, 1756), p. 103.

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drama while they kidnap the heroine. One says to the other: "for d—n me, if there are not manly Strokes, ay whole Scenes, in your last Tragedy, which at least equal *Shakespear*."[9] Fielding's rustic scene invokes a patrician attitude toward criticism akin to Swift's, aligning the pretension to literary authority with a criminal use of masculine physical power. The application of the adjective "manly" in this context exposes its function as critical shorthand for literary status. Samuel Johnson, equally cynical about the use of critical cant, puts "manly" at the top of Dick Minim's list of epithets "of which he has never settled the meaning, but which are very commodiously applied to books which he has not read, or cannot understand."[10] Here the term acts as an empty signifier, filling space in the bloated critical discourse. Both Fielding and Johnson attach an ironic consciousness to their construction of masculine critical authority that operates simultaneously with unqualified expressions of "manly" like Warton's. Such ridicule by mid-century critics indicates a pervasive reliance on the inaccurate word, but the positive connotations of "manly" were not questioned.

GROUNDING THE ARGUMENTS

The proliferation of literary criticism at the beginning of the eighteenth century in England resulted in part from the epistemological crisis of the seventeenth century, which valorized empirical knowledge. This widespread desire to evaluate literature in scientific, moral, national, and aesthetic ways represents just one of the areas in which society sought "truth." According to Michel Foucault, the objects of knowledge and the subjects who know become involved in numerous and varying power relationships when examination is intensified on a broad cultural level. By identifying the structure of knowledge – that is, how a culture gathers and validates knowledge – the "will to truth" illustrates one means of organization by which a society puts knowledge to work, and this arrangement is innately exclusive.

During this period, particularly in England, the establishment of truth takes on the ubiquitous forms of enumeration, measurement, and hierarchy: "a will to know which was prescribed . . . by the technical level

[9] Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews*, ed. Martin C. Battestin (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 1967), p. 261.

[10] Samuel Johnson, *The Idler and The Adventurer*, ed. W. J. Bate, John M. Bullitt, L. F. Powell, in *The Yale Edition of The Works of Samuel Johnson*, 16 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963), vol. II, p. 192.

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where knowledges had to be invested in *order* to be verifiable and useful."[11] In the early critical discourse, authors, readers, and works of art were scrutinized, categorized, and debated; systems of value were proposed, dismissed, and modified. The act of writing or speaking about literature assumed a certain authority, and despite (or, perhaps, because of) that century's keen awareness of the limitations of language, the critic became responsible for discerning truths about literature. Critical judgment involved the ability to distinguish specific qualities, and eighteenth-century critics apprehended these judgments through current models of difference, like gender, which involved a series of inherent power relationships.

As the inheritors of empirical discourse, eighteenth-century critics ground their literary truths in the language of objectivity, human nature, and reason. In order to be objective, writers attempt to recognize and evaluate the historical differences between various works. Thus, Pope assesses Homer's poetry in the context of his civilization in order to "regulate our present Opinion of them, by a View of that Age in which they were writ";[12] (in the process he produces a version of those epics imprinted with the unmistakable world-view of eighteenth-century Britain.[13]) For the less remote Dryden, Johnson demands that "to judge rightly of an author we must transport ourselves to his time, and examine what were the wants of his contemporaries, and what were his means of supplying them."[14] Ostensibly, this gesture removes the prejudices of a critic's entrenched perspective.

However, the discrimination of difference between the critic and the work generally gives way to the more satisfying recognition of sameness. Even though critics acknowledge some literary products as historically situated, most concur in dismissing idiosyncrasies in favor of timeless generalities, a set of privileged standards borrowed from the discourse on universal human nature. In the Western humanist tradition, influenced by Judeo-Christian origination myths, human nature is divinely ordained. Throughout this period, "nature" operates as an authoritative discourse, to borrow Bakhtin's term, because the idea refers to an honored, pre-established set of norms: "The authoritative word is located in a

[11] Michel Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," trans. Ian Mcleod, in Robert Young, ed., *Untying the Text, A Post-Structuralist Reader* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 55 (my emphasis).

[12] Alexander Pope, trans., *The Iliad of Homer*, ed. Maynard Mack, vols. VII–VIII in *The Twickenham Edition of the Poems of Alexander Pope*, 10 vols. (London: Methuen, 1967), vol. VII, p. 28.

[13] For a discussion of the role gender plays in that translation, see Carolyn D. Williams, *Pope, Homer, and Manliness: Some Aspects of Eighteenth-Century Classical Learning* (London: Routledge, 1993).

[14] Johnson, *The Six Chief Lives from Johnson's Lives of the Poets with Macaulay's Life of Johnson*, ed. Matthew Arnold, reprint (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968), p. 176.

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distanced zone, organically connected with a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher. It is, so to speak, the word of the fathers."[15] The concept of "human nature" provides the most widely accepted explanatory framework for all aspects of human experience. Consequently, "nature" underwrites the patriarchal system that enforces a hierarchical organization of gendered difference. As the ultimate ontological source of legitimation, the discourse of human nature authorizes the critic's assessment of generic difference and similarity and, furthermore, enables the rejection of representations that deviate from the standard representation of immutable human nature.

Because of its foundational status, human nature becomes the most fundamental knowledge for the critic. According to Johnson, "It ought to be the first endeavour of a writer . . . to distinguish nature from custom, or that which is established, because it is right, from that which is right only because it is established."[16] Johnson admits the possibility that social constructions of taste, or custom, may hold sway in literary discourse, but he subjugates these contingencies to the superior power of universality. Johnson's faith in the centripetal force of human nature is axiomatic, for instance, in his successful projection of Shakespeare's fame – "Nothing can please many, and please long, but just representations of general nature."[17] By positing a continuity in humanity transcending time, Johnson's criticism simplifies the measure of literary worth to the reproduction of values consistent with that theoretical sameness. The critic's authority, therefore, rests on his or her ability to discern the dominant culture's version of "nature" – synonymous with right or truth – from fashion or other spurious forms of knowledge. As will become evident in the succeeding chapters, access to a full understanding of "human nature" is circumscribed according to gender.

The capacity for reason is a fundamental commonplace of Enlightenment discourses on human nature and the bottom line for literary judgment. Eighteenth-century literary discourse projects an ideal critical community of heterogeneous participants unified through the shared faculty of reason.[18] Addison explains the phenomenon in this way:

[15] Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 342.

[16] Quoted in Joseph Warton, *Essay on Pope*, p. 126.

[17] Johnson, *Johnson on Shakespeare*, vols. VII–VIII, ed. Arthur Sherbo, in *Works*, vol. VII, p. 61.

[18] For more detailed discussion of the constitution of the autonomous subject within this public literary discourse, see Laurie Finke, *Feminist Theory, Women's Writing*, Reading Women Writing Series (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), chapter 4, esp. pp. 112–113, and Terry Eagleton, *The Function of Criticism from the "Spectator" to Post-Structuralism* (London: Verso, 1984), especially chapter 1.

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"Human Nature is the same in all reasonable Creatures; and whatever falls in with it, will meet with Admirers amongst Readers of all Qualities and Conditions."[19] The concept of universal human nature authorizes Addison, and other reasonable participants in the community, to extrapolate from his empirical point of view and to generalize about his fellow creatures. Reason thus serves as the commonality that binds all humans together; however, because not all members have equal shares of rationality, the faculty serves as a means to stratify individuals. Significantly, feminine "nature" is constructed as less rational than general human nature. Although theoretically available to all subjects in discourse, the criterion of reason acts as the practical means to limit access to "truth" and, hence, to qualify specific individuals to speak for others.

The appeals to objectivity, nature, and reason codify the critical task as orderly, stable, and to a certain extent democratic, but they also mask the historical limitations of the critic's authority. In particular, the universalizing tendencies of the discourse elide the extent to which criticism is structured by gender. In his unprecedented debunking of Pope's poetry in 1756, Joseph Warton praises Johnson's distinction between custom and nature as the "liberal and *manly* censure of critical bigotry."[20] Warton appeals to Johnson's authority to sanction his own innovative criticism, and he adopts the masculine term to enforce the propriety of his judgment. Warton's gesture aligns clear-sighted reason with the masculine identity, but more importantly, he suggests that changes in taste are negotiated in a masculine discourse. Gendered expressions in the critical discourse like Warton's expose the innately exclusive organization of knowledge that is necessary to establish the putatively neutral designation of truth.

Because I am interested in historicizing literary criticism as part of the unifying discourses of patriarchal hegemony, this analysis requires the tools that post-structuralist theories of discourse and power provide. By focusing on the level of language, these theories challenge the notion of "truth" as an objective, verifiable reality. Instead, "truth" becomes a linguistic construct whose referent is ultimately indeterminate among shifting significations. Discourse achieves a hegemonic status, nonetheless, through the impression that truth can be established and through the orchestration of power used to consolidate that impression. A single truth is posited only by the erasure of conflicting or alternative

[19] Addison, *The Spectator*, ed. Bond, vol. I, p. 297.
[20] Warton, *Essay on Pope*, pp. 126–127; my emphasis.

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expressions, and such dominance is achieved when the truth coincides with or validates the experience of the ruling population. All discourses, as postulated by Foucault, serve as the vehicle through which power or knowledge is dispersed in society. Whereas humanist thought represents conventional language as the transparent medium for the transmission of information, Foucault's theories illustrate how the articulation of such knowledge functions as power and vice versa: "It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power."[21] By excluding all knowledge that fails to reify the autonomous subject, the humanist discourse represents truth or nature as a monolithic experience. Criticism operates in a similar manner. As a discourse invested in the identification of literary "truths," criticism erects authoritative structures through the definition of "right" principles and the displacement of contradictory views; in the interest of preserving a recognizable order, criticism tends to shape truths that are consistent with hegemonic values.

Like the notion of truth, the humanistic "self" is similarly revised as a site of linguistic construction in post-structuralist theories. The self, conceived as the autonomous author of meaning or truth, becomes the "subject," an identity shaped by a given matrix of complex, interactive discourses. The Western humanist tradition establishes the illusion of the autonomous self by privileging and universalizing the experience of the *masculine* elite through the exclusion and repression of alternative realities. Foucault's writings do not explicitly account for the differing effects that normative discourse has on male and female subjects, a failing noted in many feminist modifications of his theories.[22] While his analysis of the capillary forms of power in society exposes the mythical status of the authoritative self, it fails to recognize the gendered dimension of the fictive authority. Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby propose that "for feminists, the problem with humanism is not merely that it derives from illusory assumptions about an autonomous and universal self, but that this particular self is the domain of privileged white men."[23] In order to analyze the effects of gendered language in

[21] Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–77*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980), p. 52.

[22] See Nancy Hartsock, "Foucault on Power: A Theory for Women?" in Linda J. Nicholson, ed., *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 157–175; Linda Woodbridge, "A Strange, Eventful History: Notes on Feminism, Historicism, and Literary Study," *Exemplaria: A Journal of Theory in Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 2.2 (Fall 1990), and Irene Diamond and Lee Quinby, eds., *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1988).

[23] Diamond and Quinby, eds., *Feminism and Foucault*, p. xv.

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literary criticism, it is important to realize that the construction of masculine privilege in discourse, which significantly bolsters the autonomous self, is achieved through the suppression of the feminine.

The mastery of the humanistic self is in part maintained through its separation from others, or a monolithic representation of the Other, whether designated in terms of race, culture, religion, class, gender, or any number of binary divisions. For this study, the perpetuation of a system of sexual difference in predetermined and ahistorical categories takes precedence. In order to avoid reproducing the humanistic binary of biologically determined sexes, it is helpful to envision gender as a semiotic process, drawing upon the theories of Foucault. Rather than view human sexuality as an unchanging, biological inevitability, Foucault argues that human bodies are constituted through historically specific matrices of signification.

> Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power.[24]

As a matrix of signification, sexuality occupies "an especially dense transfer point for the relations of power."[25] Foucault resists, however, identifying any binary relationship as a stable construct of power; consequently his account of sexuality minimizes the historical consistency in the distribution of power between men and women.[26] Feminists like Joan W. Scott expand Foucault's ideas to focus specifically on the gendered dynamic in the discursive production of sexuality. She conceptualizes gender as a fundamental epistemological category informed by intersecting cultural languages: "gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power."[27] Sexual difference is seen as socially constructed through manifold cultural forms of representation, and these signifying systems are not neutral but, rather,

[24] Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley, 3 vols. (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), vol. 1, pp. 105–106.
[25] Ibid., p. 103.
[26] See in particular his "Rules of continual variations," ibid., p. 99.
[27] Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis," *American Historical Review*, 91 (December 1986), p. 1067.

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