CATHERINE INGRASSIA

Introduction

Virginia Woolf observed that the fact non-aristocratic women "took to" writing and publishing in the seventeenth century "matters far more than I can prove in an hour's discourse."[1] Her words – that women's writing *matters* – remain as relevant today as they did nearly a century ago. Narratives of literary history change as each successive generation of scholars and students refines, revises, and perhaps transforms the understanding of a literary period. Nowhere is that transformative process more evident than in the literary history of women's writing in England.

In the early twentieth century, some scholars championed individual woman writers through, in part, the recovery of primary texts: Myra Reynolds's 1903 publication of the poems of Anne Finch (1661–1720), Montague Summers's 1915 edition of the works of Aphra Behn (1640?–89), or William McBurney's 1963 collection of novels from the 1720s that included texts by Eliza Haywood (1693?-1756) and Mary Davys (1674–1732). Woolf herself briefly mentions women writers discussed within these pages – from Behn, Finch, and Haywood to Laetitia Pilkington (1709–50), Elizabeth Carter (1717–1806), and Frances Burney (1752–1840) – giving a tantalizing glimpse of the wealth of primary materials available. These isolated efforts did not constitute a sustained, systematic, or, frankly, accepted critical tradition on women writers. Indeed, early twentieth-century criticism is the legacy of what Clifford Siskin has termed "The Great Forgetting" – the gendering of the discipline of literary studies in ways that excluded writing by women.[2]

In the past three decades, however, a recovery project of women writers has occurred – the process of identifying forgotten or ignored writers, making their primary texts available, and incorporating a consideration of their work into scholarship and classrooms. Scholars have been able to use sophisticated theoretical, bibliographic, and biographical tools to write women into literary history across the full range of genres. These developments coupled with the profound influence of feminist criticism on

eighteenth-century studies specifically and literary studies generally and the increasing presence of women in the academy have produced foundational work on women writers of this period and reshaped the field.

Consequently, a current generation of students expects anthologies and syllabi that include women writers, often unaware of the conditions necessary for that integration to occur. No longer can (or should) scholars teach or write about the period known as the "long eighteenth century" without meticulous attention to women and their texts. Women wrote extensively across multiple genres – fiction, drama, memoirs, translations, periodicals, histories, poetry – and had a significant presence in print culture. Their writing constituted a significant portion of the literary marketplace throughout this period. Similarly, for many literate women, the practice of reading and writing comprised an important part of their daily lives.

This *Companion* is designed to provide a general introduction to women's writing in Britain between 1660 and 1789 by offering recent scholarship, discussions of both canonical and lesser-known women writers, and an understanding of the scope of women's writing during this period. It highlights the differences in class, geography, or employment that define women writers and presents a representative range of genres to illustrate their variety and versatility. It also illustrates how women writers operated as professional, published authors during the long eighteenth century, how they engaged in central issues of the public sphere, and how they created a literary space through their work. As a point of entry for the fourteen essays that follow, this introduction provides a context for thinking about women's writing in the Restoration and eighteenth century; briefly highlights the work that has been done on eighteenth-century women writers heretofore, work on which these essays build; and proposes where scholars and students of women's writing in Britain between 1660 and 1789 might go from here. While scholars and students can no longer imagine writing literary history or engaging in a critical practice that excludes women writers, so integral were they to the period, they must recognize the past work these women's presence represents and the future work it still demands.

Women's writing in Britain 1660–1789

The eighteenth century began its own process of writing a kind of women's literary history. Publications such as George Ballard's biographical offering *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (1752) or George Colman and Bonnell Thornton's *Poems by Eminent Ladies* (1755), the first substantial printed collection of women's verse, intertwined biography, morality, and aesthetics, privileging writers who exhibited propriety, modesty, and

decorum. Colman and Thornton celebrated a very specific type of woman writer – refined, domestic, and adhering to the heteronormative expectations of a patriarchal culture. The anthologies effaced impulses inconsistent with the vision of women writers as a virtuous group advancing moral and aesthetic claims of the period; consequently, these texts, and others like them, constituted a kind of ad hoc literary history.

Similarly, John Duncombe's 1754 *The Feminiad* celebrated the efforts of British women writers, highlighting, as critics did throughout the century, the ways British national identity was enhanced by such illustrious women. In Britain, asserts Duncombe, women do not live within a "seraglio's gloomy walls" where "Nor sense, nor souls for women are assign'd." Rather "our British nymphs with happie omens rove / at Freedom's call, thro' wisdom's sacred grove."[3] Duncombe creates a tradition that begins with poet Katherine Philips (1632–64) "the chaste ORINDA" (110) and continues to Anne Finch "a lady of great wit, and genius" (130) and Catharine Trotter Cockburn (1674?–1749), "Philosopher, Divine, and Poet join'd!" (138). Similarly, Elizabeth Singer Rowe (1674–1737) and Frances Seymour, Countess of Hertford (1699–1754) receive Duncombe's praise. By contrast, Delarivier Manley (c. 1670–1724), Susannah Centlivre (1669?–1723), Behn, and Pilkington, although "harmony thro' all their numbers flow'd" (145), fall victim to what Duncombe terms "the dangerous sallies of a wanton Muse" (148).

Duncombe's celebration, a selective history, exalts predominantly poets (the most elevated and socially acceptable genre) of the gentry or aristocracy who published anonymously (Finch and Rowe initially) or with apparently noncommercial motives. Duncombe embraces writers who appear to value female modesty and morality above literary ambition. Duncombe singles out for criticism writers such as Manley, Centlivre, Behn, and Pilkington, who all circulated actively and with varied success in the emergent London literary marketplace and the world of print culture, a site of commercial activity. For example, Behn, regarded by many as the first professional female author, wrote variously and copiously across poetry, drama, and prose fiction, producing at least eighteen plays; five short fictions; two collections of poetry; translations; and a variety of other poems, prologues, and epilogues. Although she actually lived in an economically precarious position for most of her professional life, she sought both reliable financial compensation and an enhanced literary reputation. She defied the cultural expectations for appropriately "feminine" behavior with her prolificity, political engagement, frank representation of sexuality, and clearly stated literary ambition. Consequently, she ran afoul of the prescribed expectations for gentility and feminine modesty.

Duncombe's mid-century text, with its critique of "immoral" female writers and celebration of those whose virtuous, edifying discourse enhances national pride, aligns with dominant cultural norms. For example, Anne Finch in "The Circuit of Appollo," her tribute to female poets, notes that Behn wrote "a little too loosly [sic]."[4] Similarly, poet and memoirist Laetitia Pilkington, herself a figure of scandal, criticizes the "wicked Art of painting up Vice in attractive Colours, as too many of our Female Writers have done to the Destruction of Thousands, amongst whom Mrs. *Manley*, and Mrs. *Haywood* deserve the foremost Rank."[5] (Pilkington's somewhat gratuitous comment seems a strategic move to deflect criticism from her own personal history, revived with the publication of her memoirs.) This moralistic attitude, feigned or legitimate, persisted through the end of the century and beyond. In *The Complete History of the English Stage* (1800), Charles Dibdin characterizes playwright Centlivre as immoral, stating that "when women lose that female delicacy which is their worthiest designation and become Saphos [sic] in writing they may be as well Saphos in every other respect."[6] Allegations of immorality, often borne of professional anxiety, plagued women writers consistently in the eighteenth century.

Women writers confronted obstacles other than the allegations of immorality, however. Cultural anxiety existed about women's intellectual activity beyond regulated boundaries. Poet Elizabeth Thomas (1675–1731) describes women as confined by pervasive social mores or "custom": "By Customs *Tyranny* confin'd / To foolish *Needle-work*, and *Chat*,"[7] relegated to "domestick Tools" (7); "if we enquire for a *Book*, / Beyond a *Novel*, or a *Play*, / . . . how soon th' Alarms took" (50–53). Although Thomas describes a world where women's writing is severely circumscribed to a "novel or a play," pleasure reading itself was often suspect. As detailed in "Instructions to Youth of Both Sexes in Proper Choice of Books" (1778), "reading ought not to be confined to mere amusement: that is its lowest form." The "impious buffoonery, false wit, and indelicacy [of] a Haywood, a Behn, a Pilkington [are] the delight of the gay, the volatile, and the inconsiderate." As a result, they should be avoided like "the worst poison" for they have been "injurious to thousands" and their "consequences" are often discovered "too late to be easily remedied."[8]

Women who wrote and published faced criticism about their position as, in the ironic words of Finch, "an intruder on the rights of men"; " Such a presumptuous Creature, is esteem'd / The fault, can by no virtue be redeem'd."[9] In the Dedication to *The Platonick Lady* (1707), Centlivre observes that readers, booksellers, and audience members, upon discovering a play they like has been written by a woman, "alter their judgment, by the Esteem they have for the Author, tho' the Play is still the same." "Why this

Wrath against the Women's works?" she continues. "Perhaps you'll answer because they meddle with things out of their Sphere."[10] This attitude extended to the belief that women's capacity and appropriateness for literary pursuits were limited purely on account of their gender. In his infamous tract *The Unsex'd Females* (1798), Richard Polwhele vociferously condemns "A female band despising NATURE's law" – writers he identifies as Elizabeth Carter, Frances Burney, and Anna Seward (1742–1809) – who "court prurient Fancy" in their literary pursuits.[11] Women certainly questioned these cultural assumptions about the intellectual disparity between the genders – "Why in the Age has Heaven allow'd you more / And Women less of Wit than heretofore?" asks Behn in the Epilogue to *Sir Patient Fancy* (1678). Yet, this cultural belief sometimes compelled women to adopt a strategic rhetorical position that displayed affected modesty in the appraisal of their own skills. In the dedication to the play *The Busie Body* (1709), Centlivre claims to be "conscious of the inequality of a Female Pen." Throughout *Oroonoko*, Behn regrets "only a female pen" could celebrate the title character.

Although a twenty-first-century reader might assume that the dominant resistance to women writing came primarily from men, eighteenth-century women writers prove otherwise. In the Dedication to *The Platonick Lady*, which she directs "To all the Generous Encouragers of Female Ingenuity," Centlivre laments that "even my own Sex, which shou'd assert our Prerogative against such Detractors, are often backward to encourage a Female Pen."[12] Similarly, Mary Barber ventriloquizes her female contemporaries who denounce her pursuit of poetry. Fulvia affirms that "Verses are only writ by Men / I know a Woman cannot write."[13] To label a woman "a wit," a desirable appellation in a man, "means self-conceit, ill nature, pride" in a woman as poet, writes Esther Lewis Clark (1716–94).[14] Women writers also regularly faced accusations of plagiarism; confronted barriers to education; and, later in the century with the rise of the critic and professional reviews, experienced biased critiques that highlighted gender.

While literacy rates for women climbed steadily during the eighteenth century, women's access to education was uneven, contingent on class, resources, and family attitudes. Certainly, some women were well educated. Elizabeth Carter or Constantia Grierson (1704/5–32) acquired the formidable language skills necessary to publish highly regarded translations of Epictetus and Tacitus, respectively. Servants such as Mary Leapor (1722–46) and Mary Collier (1688?–1762), "the washerwoman poet," used access to their employers' libraries to educate themselves. Collier describes reading as "my Recreation," devoting "what leisure time I had to Books."[15] At the opposite end of the social spectrum, Lady Mary Wortley

Montagu's well-known letter of January 28, 1753, to her daughter, Lady Bute, famously endorses the value of reading as part of a female education: "No Entertainment is so cheap as reading, nor any pleasure so lasting." She similarly encourages women to learn "the Languages" because, unlike a man, a girl's "time is not so precious. She cannot advance herself in any profession, and has therefore more hours to spare."[16] (Although, as Elizabeth Thomas notes in "On Sir J – S –, saying in a Sarcastick Manner, My books would make me Mad. An Ode" when women marry, they "in their House a full Employment find, / And little Time command to cultivate the Mind."[17])

As Montagu's letter confirms, while women might find opportunities for education, meaningful employment was largely nonexistent (women cannot "advance ... in any profession"). Eliza Haywood's *Anti-Pamela* (1741), a satiric response to Richardson's *Pamela* (1740), offers a trenchant appraisal of the dearth of employment options for women: Syrena Tricksey moves from an apprenticeship in a milliner's shop to domestic service (ranging from a lady's maid to housekeeper) and ultimately, and necessarily, pursues various forms of sexual labor. As Mary Hays illustrates very differently in *A Victim of Prejudice* (1799) at the end of the century, even well-educated women found it difficult to earn a living, find meaningful employment, or escape the limiting conditions of the sexual economy. Unable to own property and becoming their husband's property upon marriage, women, unless widowed, faced limited financial options.

Writing, however, potentially presented a means for women to earn a living. Mary Robinson's Mrs. Morely in *The Natural Daughter* (1799) turns to writing (after a short-lived career as an actress) because she has calculated it as a means "for the attainment of fame and profit."[18] The literary marketplace and the opportunities provided by print culture presented women working as professional authors the chance to publish in multiple genres and to earn some sort of income, ranging from a living wage to possibly a sustainable sum. Laboring-class poets such as Ann Yearsley (1753–1806) and Mary Chandler (1687–1745), like their middling-class counterparts, recognized the opportunity to exploit the ways subscription publication could operate as a form of charity to their potential advantage. As Mary Collier recounts in the preface to *The Woman's Labour* (1739), "the Author, whose Life is toilsome, and her Wages inconsiderable" confesses honestly "that the View of putting a small Sum of Money in her Pocket ... had its Share of Influence upon this Publication," which was done by subscription.[19] Poignantly, Collier recounts in a subsequent collection of poems (1762) that she actually profited little from the poem that initially brought her fame; having printed her poem "at my own charge,"

she writes, "I lost nothing, neither did I gain much, others run away with the profit."[20]

For some writers, however, publication (especially by subscription) offered a chance to earn a sum that would potentially allow them to move into another, more reliable form of employment and to escape what Elizabeth Boyd (fl. 1727–1745) terms "the exigencies of fortune." Boyd, also known as "Louisa," provides an interesting example of a woman writer navigating the cultural and commercial dynamics of the literary marketplace to achieve a specific financial, rather than purely literary, end. In 1732, Boyd issued a proposal for "printing a novel entitled 'The Happy Unfortunate: or, the Female Page'" by subscription. The price to subscribers was "Five Shillings; Half a Crown to be paid down, and Half a Crown on the Delivery of the Book," which would "be printed in Octavo, on good Paper, and a fair Letter"; the specific elements about the quality of the book bespeak a relatively knowledgeable consumer who recognizes the importance of the size of the book (octavo) and quality of typeface ("fair letter").[21]

In the March 2, 1732, advertisement to the published novel itself, Boyd claims she "was never ambitious of the Name of an Author" (despite having previously published two poems and publishing again after *The Happy-Unfortunate*), "nor ever designed to indulge my Inclinations in writing any Thing of this Nature, more then for my own private amusement." Rather, she claims to publish "this Manuscript (which otherwise I never had done) with a View of settling my self in a Way of Trade; that may enable me to master those Exigencies of Fortune." Now, she hopes her "honourable Subscribers (who are not already engag'd) [might] be so very good as to be [her] Customers" at her stationery shop: "I shall directly sell Paper, Pens, Ink, Wax, Wafers, Black Lead Pencils, Pocket Books, Almanacks, Plays, Pamphlets, and all Manner of Stationary Goods,"[22] a listing of wares that also reveals much about the material culture of reading and writing.

While this publication allegedly marks Boyd's removal from the literary marketplace, the prefatory materials actually position her within it as a potential rival to Eliza Haywood, revealing Haywood's commercial stature and literary reputation. The poem "On *Louisa*'s NOVEL, call'd *The Happy-Unfortunate*," situated between the list of subscribers' names and the novel itself, begins "Yield Heywood [sic] yield, yield all whose tender Strains, / Inspire the Dreams of Maids and lovesick Swains; / .... / A new Eliza writes –." Boyd, potentially "a new Eliza," illustrates the permeable nature of the commercial marketplace as an author could transition into a bookseller and then back into an author – or something else altogether. Boyd

was not alone in this professional shifting. Novelist and playwright Mary Davys earned enough money from her writing to open a coffeehouse in Cambridge in 1718. In the 1740s, Haywood operated a book shop while still writing, illustrating the integrated activities of writing, publishing, and printing, a fluidity that informs the careers of a number of women writers, especially those located primarily in London.

Print culture provided women writers with previously unimagined opportunities – to earn money; to achieve self-actualization; to secure some modicum of independence; to express their political, religious, or social views; and to experiment with literary form. They had a consistent and active engagement with the discursive world and the public sphere. One career path does not accommodate the movement of all women writers – indeed, to suggest that all these writers had the level of control or intentionality associated with the term "career" is a bit of a misnomer. Some, like Boyd or Haywood, carefully navigated the literary marketplace, seeking to position themselves advantageously for opportunities in writing or publishing that might arise. Others, like Carter or Seward, worked to preserve their high cultural capital and published strategically. Still others, like Jane Barker (1652–1732) or Finch, for example, operated in a hybrid culture, circulating within literary coteries in which they shared work and ideas before they ultimately published. These varied paths – and certainly many more exist – reveal the impossibility of using generalities to describe "women writers" during this period. To do so flattens the differences in age, place, class, education, political orientation, and cultural perspective that informs their texts and their professional choices (to the degree they had control of those choices). Such categories also predispose scholars and students to read the narratives of these women's lives through a preexisting lens. As becomes abundantly apparent, it is imperative to shed preconceptions about "women writers" in order to come close to understanding the complexity of the commercial and cultural world in which they operated. While a volume such as this one cannot exhaustively represent every perspective – nor could any – it should enable the reader to recognize the diversity and significance of women's writing during this period.

Previous work on women's writing in Britain, 1660–1789

The feminist recovery of women writers has been well documented and the foundational work in multiple disciplines (some represented in the "Guide to further reading") has demonstrated the unquestionable centrality of women writers, examined the gender hierarchies and sociocultural limitations confining them, and succeeded in writing them more accurately into literary

history. The field has moved far from early feminist work that often focused on biography, constructed narratives of feminist triumph, and concentrated primarily on prose fiction. At times, the early efforts of recovery placed greater importance on identifying the presence of women writers and the quantity of their work than on the quality of those texts. Eager to construct a tradition of "women writers," scholars sometimes did so at the cost of the finer delineations and subtle differences necessarily effaced with that general term.

In the past two decades, however, with increasing sophistication scholars have brought a more refined and nuanced approach to women's work in multiple genres. Scholars such as Paula McDowell, Cheryl Turner, and Catherine Gallagher, among others, situated women within the commercial world of print culture. Ros Ballaster and Jane Spencer enriched our understanding of the kind of prose narratives women produced and their connection with contemporaneous discourses. Within specific genres, Paula Backscheider's work on women poets introduced a completely new way of considering that genre; Felicity Nussbaum, Misty Anderson, and Laura Rosenthal brought fresh perspectives to drama, Devoney Looser and Ruth Mack to women's writing of history. Similarly, work on individual authors, both major and minor, has advanced significantly: Claudia T. Kairoff on Anna Seward, Norbert Schürer on Charlotte Lennox, and Kathryn King on Jane Barker and more recently Eliza Haywood. The list of foundational work is extensive (and included in the "Guide to further reading").

These efforts of recovery and recuperation bring the current generation of scholars and students to the point where they can use the rigorous skills of biography, textual studies, and emergent theoretical approaches to complicate existing and formulate new, more precise narratives that further advance the understanding of women writers. Such gains have already occurred for a number of important writers. For example, the history of the scholarship on Eliza Haywood, acknowledged as one of the period's most prolific and significant writers, provides a revealing perspective on the changes within the treatment of female writers over the past decades. As with many women writers, scholarship on Haywood was shaped by the work of her earliest critics, who often read with the limitations of their own cultural moment. Haywood's first modern biographer George Frisbie Whicher, in *The Life and Romances of Eliza Haywood* (1915), at times grasped Haywood's "significance," noting her contributions "cannot safely be ignored;"[23] however, he too often blurred the discursive and the biographical, allowing his attitude toward the "lady novelist" to color his (mis) readings of the sparse biographical information then available.

The biographical inaccuracies he introduced, borne of his culturally bound assumptions, remained unrefuted until newly rigorous biographical work emerged in the early 1990s and culminated, most recently, with Kathryn King's *Political Biography of Eliza Haywood* (2012). Painstaking archival work – work habitually done on many male writers – provided a completely new understanding of Haywood.

Similar advances occurred with the interpretation of Haywood's prose fiction (the genre most frequently treated). In the 1960s, scholars such as William McBurney expressed hope his edition of Haywood's *Philidore and Placentia* (1727) would "send students" to the author, recognizing her importance.[24] Similarly, John Richetti helped bring Haywood to the fore by discussing her as a precursor to the more developed novel of the 1740s. However, they, like many of their contemporaries, read with a model of the novel informed by Ian Watt's privileging of realistic fiction and an artificially stable definition of genre.[25] Consequently, early scholars regarded Haywood as a writer who did not meet the formal or aesthetic expectations for a "novel." Subsequently, serious and sustained attention incorporated Haywood's work into the history of the novel, identified her work's philosophical and political dimensions, and revealed her high degree of narrative experimentation. Such scholarship helped explode what Paula Backscheider terms "the Story" of Eliza Haywood – the too-familiar, ultimately erroneous narrative of her life and works.[26] Many other women writers similarly bear the burden of that kind of critical shorthand, a "story" that helps characterize their contribution – stories scholars must continue to revise.

Within the past decades, scholars have benefited from a multivolume collection of Haywood's works (2000–2001), an invaluable bibliography by Patrick Spedding (2004), and the previously mentioned biography by Kathryn King. Together these fundamental tools of scholarship, which themselves confirm Haywood's significance as an author, have enabled entirely new, highly refined, often revisionary, insights. For example, using Spedding's bibliographic work as a foundation, Al Coppola recently showed that characterizations of Haywood as purely a "scandalous" writer are, in fact, erroneous.[27] Haywood's publishers carefully advertised various texts to different market segments (in something that resembled niche marketing), commodifying her as both a writer of elevation and refined sensibilities and a writer of amatory fiction; they then determined which model offered greater saleablility. This insight, impossible without the tools for careful textual history, helps explode "the story." Haywood serves as just one example of the rich possibilities next steps in the recovery project offer.