CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521850606 - The Professionalization of Women Writers in Eighteenth-Century Britain
Betty A. Schellenberg
Excerpt
More information

Introduction: "building on public approbation"

> I am much more hurt on your account than my own at your losing by this book; I hope it may yet sell: but if not, I have no judgment or St. Forlaix will make you amends; if I tho't it woud not I should be very unhappy.
>
> I am much obligd to your delicacy in not telling me this sooner, but you need never make any ceremony with me; for I am one who can hear truth tho' it makes against me.
>
> In any future publication I will take care you shall not lose; I will share the profit or loss of the history; & if, in any other, you disapprove that mode, we will not fix the price till what I write has been six months publish'd. I have thots of writing for the theatre, after the hist. is finishd; but it is difficult to get things done: if I succeed that way, I shall give up all others, as I like it best; in that case you know the price is always fix'd.[1]
>
> (Frances Brooke to James Dodsley, 17??)

BEYOND FEMINIST LITERARY HISTORY?

Eschewing ceremony, able to hear the truth, negotiating future terms, liking the playwright's chances for success best – the writer of this 1769 letter to James Dodsley is clearly a competent literary professional, an economic agent confidently offering authorial expertise and flexibility as the basis for a durable and productive collaboration with this prominent bookseller. Yet this writer is also a woman, Frances Brooke, whom Janet Todd included in her 1989 *The Sign of Angellica: Women, Writing and Fiction, 1660–1800* in a group of "ladies approved by the Doctor [Samuel Johnson]" because, unlike the contemporaries he describes with "horror" as a "'generation of Amazons of the pen,'" these ladies "will never openly handle a weapon or in any way defy 'masculine tyranny.'"[2] The Frances Brooke designated by Todd and other feminist literary

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521850606 - The Professionalization of Women Writers in Eighteenth-Century Britain
Betty A. Schellenberg
Excerpt
More information

historians as a "Modest Muse" cannot readily be aligned with this letter-writer.[3] It is this gap between the eighteenth-century evidence and the late twentieth-century perspective that this book will address.

My inquiry took root in graduate student days in the late 1980s, when my discovery of eighteenth-century studies coincided with a re-invigoration of the field through exciting new historicist, materialist, print culture, and above all, feminist approaches. The novelty of the attention paid to noncanonical women writers in such overviews of the period as Jane Spencer's *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (1986), Kathryn Shevelow's *Women and Print Culture: The Construction of Femininity in the Early Periodical* (1989), and Janet Todd's *The Sign of Angellica* (1989) was captured by Patricia Meyer Spacks, who in 1990 reviewed *The Sign of Angellica* as responding to "a great recent shift in literary assumptions" with what "only a few years [before], would have seemed inconceivable to write, or to read, a literary history of the Restoration and eighteenth century focused entirely on women."[4]

The influence of these studies was equally felt in the form of an interpretive frame they had adopted – the model of a separate-spheres gender economy, established with the rise of a bourgeois class in the eighteenth century, which relegated women to the private (domestic) sphere, and to rigid codes of sexual chastity, propriety, and silence.[5] From this starting point, women writers' interventions in the public realm of print were by definition transgressive. As Shevelow put it, women writers were permitted to enter the public sphere of letters only to reinforce the figure of "the domestic woman, constructed in a relation of difference to men, a difference of kind rather than degree." Forays into print had therefore to present a legitimizing face to the public, whether that of an authorizing male literary figure or that of the author herself in an apologetic preamble about "domestic distress, financial necessity, and the urge to instruct other women."[6] The actual matter of such publications, it followed, would either be genuinely orthodox, and in that case produced by the appropriated voice of a submissive woman, or itself in masquerade, its subversion peeping slyly out from beneath a surface orthodoxy, in the case of a writer of genuine feminist convictions. Thus this account of eighteenth-century women writers, using gender as fundamental binary cause, produced layers of oppositional and inevitably value-laden categories of masculine and feminine, cultural gatekeeper and supplicant, surface and depth, orthodox and subversive, appropriated and feminist.

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521850606 - The Professionalization of Women Writers in Eighteenth-Century Britain
Betty A. Schellenberg
Excerpt
More information

I must emphasize that in Spencer, Shevelow, and Todd the model I have just described is more nuanced than its influence on subsequent literary criticism would suggest.[7] Nevertheless, the interpretive frame had a tendency to become increasingly schematic with each application, especially in the area that concerns me here, the height of the eighteenth century. For the binary synchronic structure of this model was given narrative momentum by a diachronic explanation of the long eighteenth century which might be called, if somewhat disrespectfully, the "sandwich model." Restoration and early eighteenth-century writers such as Aphra Behn and Delarivier Manley engaged in a brief flowering of feminism characterized by what Todd described as "sophisticated insights and techniques," displayed in productions which were "erotic and worldly." A century later, fiction "seem[ed] to gain a new strength from an assumption of the moralist's authority" with Frances Burney, Ann Radcliffe, and Mary Wollstonecraft. Between these endpoints, writers such as Frances Brooke, along with Sarah Fielding, Frances Sheridan, and Sarah Scott, on the other hand, represented an eclipse of feminism by the so-called "modest muse," constrained and appropriated by patriarchal figures like Samuel Richardson, and characterized by "a moralistic . . . colluding with the growing ideology of femininity, preaching and greatly rewarding self-sacrifice and restraint."[8] Spencer argued, similarly, that eighteenth-century women writers increasingly succeeded in the public sphere through skillful reinforcement of the ideology locating women's lives in the domestic realm. In other words, they learned to meet "the Terms of Acceptance" for their writing in order to gain acknowledgment of their talents.[9]

As Spacks noted in her review, "Todd's sympathy appears fully engaged" with Restoration and early eighteenth-century writers, but she "has more difficulty" with mid-century writers of sentiment, making their works "sound unappealing indeed," only to have "her interest intensif[y] as she considers the century's final decade."[10] Not surprisingly, such treatments led to much further work on those early and later writers where evidence of feminist convictions, or at least subversion, was relatively easy to find, especially when it took the form of representations of female sexual desire. The Restoration and early eighteenth-century writers Behn, Manley, and Eliza Haywood, for example, have been reexamined in their significantly different political and professional contexts, not only by Todd and Spencer, but also by Ros Ballaster, Catherine Ingrassia, and others.[11] Ultimately, one effect of such work has been to put pressure on a rigid separate-sphere thesis, resulting in a more nuanced approach to all

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521850606 - The Professionalization of Women Writers in Eighteenth-Century Britain
Betty A. Schellenberg
Excerpt
More information

women writers of this time. Recent work has increasingly represented the relation between gender ideology and the individual writer's experience and works as contested and variable. Exploiting the potential for a much-broadened perspective of eighteenth-century publication enabled by the ongoing *English Short Title Catalogue (ESTC)* project, Paula McDowell, in her exemplary 1998 study *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace 1678–1730*, employs the methods of book history to challenge the public–private gender dichotomy in the sphere of print publication. One effect of McDowell's discovery of women's extensive engagement in a wide range of publishing activities is to challenge notions of their lack of agency in the political public sphere.[12] With respect to an individual writer, the late Restoration royalist Jane Barker, Kathryn King has in turn pointed out that reading Barker "*within* a narrative of the emerging bourgeois femininity and *against* the more flamboyant literary practices of the sex-and-scandal school of female popular fiction" is at best unhelpful for this writer marginalized in multiple senses as a Catholic, a Jacobite, an intellectual woman, and a spinster. King's study demonstrates that "gender-driven, oppositional accounts of early modern women writers, so hugely productive over the last couple of decades, have reached a point of diminishing returns and will need to be supplemented by more inclusive pictures of women's involvement in early modern culture if feminist literary history is to move forward."[13]

Indeed, feminist historians of the pre-twentieth century have for some time been raising concerns about the value of this broad-brush model as an analytical tool, in part because of its seeming applicability to any number of historical moments and because of its reliance on suspect combinations of prescriptive and descriptive sources. In her 1993 article "Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women's History," Amanda Vickery helpfully reviewed theoretical and methodological critiques from the late 1980s, while noting the continued reliance of historians of British women's experience on the assumption that a gendered public–private dichotomy developed in England from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries. Vickery concluded that

> the notion of separate spheres . . . has done modern women's history a great service. With this conceptual framework women's history moved beyond a Whiggish celebration of the rise of feminism, or a virtuous rediscovery of those previously hidden from history. In asserting the instrumental role of the ideology of separate spheres in modern class formation, historians asserted the wider

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521850606 - The Professionalization of Women Writers in Eighteenth-Century Britain
Betty A. Schellenberg
Excerpt
More information

historical significance of gender. Thereby the interpretation offered powerful justification for the study of women when the field was embattled. Yet strategic concerns do not in themselves justify the deployment of an artificial and unwieldy conceptual vocabulary. In the attempt to map the breadth and boundaries of female experience, new categories and concepts must be generated, and this must be done with more sensitivity to women's own manuscripts.[14]

In a similar vein, but dealing more directly with historiography of the eighteenth century, Lawrence E. Klein, in a 1995 article on "Gender and the Public/Private Distinction in the Eighteenth Century," has questioned the "domestic thesis" for superimposing the two binary oppositions of male/female and public/private to argue for "the persistent exclusion of women from public roles, power and citizenship." Klein notes that this model fails to take into account evidence that "even when theory was against them, women in the eighteenth century had [conscious] public dimensions to their lives."[15] Such work revisits Jürgen Habermas's influential discussion of the rise of the bourgeois public sphere in eighteenth-century England, in order to pry open the fissure between Habermas's scheme of a public sphere of letters which is broadly inclusive and a public political sphere which grows out of the former, but is made up of private individuals who are male, middle-class heads of households.[16]

For some time, then, the call for a new theory and methodology of eighteenth-century women's literary history has been sounded, and it has been taken up in some of the studies of early eighteenth-century writers noted above. More pertinently here, however, the more nuanced and particularized approach has done little to alter one aspect of the original model: its representation of the "filling" in the sandwich. Turning again and again to generalizations about female writers cowering behind their anonymity before censorious or condescending male contemporaries, studies of works by women novelists, in particular, have remained firmly grounded in variations on a view of the 1740s to 1770s as the Age of Johnson, Richardson, and Fielding. It has seemed that there is nothing new to say about writers of whom it has been said that "each fulfills [Richardson's] demand and indeed writes in his shadow."[17] McDowell's book is a case in point: it relies once again on 1980s histories of women's writings to claim that, unlike the "unprecedented" and "heterogeneous" involvement of women in print in the early eighteenth century, the period she has examined closely, the remainder of the century was characterized by an increasing "depoliticization" of women.[18]

Thus the generalization that Frank Donoghue, in his 1996 *The Fame Machine: Book Reviewing and Eighteenth-Century Literary Careers*, uses to

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521850606 - The Professionalization of Women Writers in Eighteenth-Century Britain
Betty A. Schellenberg
Excerpt
More information

describe the 1750s and 1760s, might in fact unwittingly describe our own critical habits in approaching those decades; he speaks of "the particular difficulty women experienced not only in writing professionally, but in having a professional life story analogous to those of successful male writers."[19] It is troubling to encounter this deeply entrenched way of seeing in Donoghue's own otherwise valuable study of eighteenth-century literary careers. He begins with a warning against a focus on Samuel Johnson as "lead[ing] one to forget how unique a figure he was, . . . thereby skew[ing] a literary history of his time." If uniqueness skews history, the corrective Donoghue supplies in the case of women writers goes to the opposite extreme. His fine chapter-length examinations of Laurence Sterne, Oliver Goldsmith, and Tobias Smollett in turn are followed by a single, sixteen-page chapter subtitled "Female Literary Careers," featuring three paragraphs on Charlotte Smith, Charlotte Lennox, and Sarah Fielding combined, less than six pages on Elizabeth Griffith and Frances Sheridan, and a final five pages on Frances Burney.

The message is that none of these women's careers could be unique, while collectively they represent something definably uniform: the female literary career. Indeed, this is made explicit in the chapter's opening, where we are told categorically, with a supporting reference only to Elaine Showalter's work on nineteenth-century women writers, that "Just as women could only produce literature under marginalizing conditions, so too was the reception of their writing uniformly compromised." Given such a starting point, it is not surprising that when Donoghue sets out "to explore some of the strategies that women writers employed to try to circumvent the institutional handicaps under which they labored," his findings bring him to the bleak conclusion "that all their efforts were destined to fail. In the early stages, described here, the literary career was an exclusively male form of social practice."[20] In short, for most accounts of women writing at the height of the century, it has remained beyond question that gender is the essential explanatory fact, that a female author's achievement in the sphere of print letters, in its modes and its degree, is predicated upon the conditions governing her life as a woman. Todd's words resonate still: "What women created in the mid-eighteenth century was not simply writing but *feminine* writing."[21]

This study therefore arises out of an ongoing dissatisfaction with the standard frameworks used for discussion of these women writers, and out of an attempt to find new ways of seeing. For I have come to believe that the problem now lies, not so much in a lack of evidence about these women's professional lives, but rather in our continued attempt to fit the

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521850606 - The Professionalization of Women Writers in Eighteenth-Century Britain
Betty A. Schellenberg
Excerpt
More information

evidence into habitual frames of reference; we need, to shift my metaphor, new wineskins in which to store our new wine. In two 1993 analyses that have been influential in my own thinking, Margaret J. M. Ezell and Paula McDowell identified the last half of the eighteenth century as a crux of lasting importance in telling the story of women as authors. In *Writing Women's Literary History*, Ezell argued that the historiographical models, and accompanying biases, of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary biographers were set in the 1750s by collectors of female worthies such as George Ballard, whose ideal of the "modest, middle-class, well-read, pious, and charitable" woman who "does not challenge her society in any direct way except to urge further educational activities," discreetly hidden under the antiquarian's objective stance, was instrumental in "marginalizing or even erasing women writers who did not fit within his criteria."[22] McDowell simultaneously identified this historical moment as the point of origin of "a distinct literary history of women," which in its "mass marketing of the 'literary lady' in anthologies, miscellanies, and collections, functioned to contain and control what was by the eighteenth century recognized as a genuine threat to the existing social order: the unprecedented opportunities inherent in the new literary marketplace for women's public political and social critique."[23] Most importantly for my purposes, Ezell claimed that Ballard's categories, together with the ensuing gradual restriction of the "literary" to imaginative writing, have reached centuries forward, impairing the ability of much more recent feminist literary historiographers to see the writerly activity and influence of women who were in their own time active, successful, and respected publishing authors in a wide range of genres. In short, while rejecting Ballard's values, Ezell notes, we have tended to adopt his dichotomous, essentialist categories of women writers and what they were writing.[24]

While Ezell and McDowell were concerned to identify the effects of this phenomenon on the historiography of earlier women writers, the period wherein they laid the blame, the mid-eighteenth century, is of double importance to me as that on which I am focusing in this study. In the end, both Ezell and McDowell maintained their assumption of the victimization of women writers, of their exclusion, silencing, even "positive erasure,"[25] while they historicized and particularized this erasure as the product of a specific cultural moment, in which the dynamics of print production, gender ideology, and reader tastes were implicated. But where in this crucial moment were the women who were researching, writing, patronizing, or managing, and what were they saying? Was the

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521850606 - The Professionalization of Women Writers in Eighteenth-Century Britain
Betty A. Schellenberg
Excerpt
More information

cultural and discursive system indeed as monolithically oppressive as it has been represented to be, and were women indeed its victims to the extent we have assumed?[26] Furthermore, were reading and writing always construed as essentially gendered, forcing female participants either to engage in "patriarchal discourse" or to subvert it through a defiant choice of "feminine" modes? A binary of oppressor and victim does not tell us enough, indeed, misleads us.

Recently, there have been indications that historians are prepared to challenge the assumption that the middle decades of the century represent an eclipse of women's self-assertion and a full retreat into bourgeois domesticity. In her 2000 *Small Change: Women, Learning, Patriotism, 1750–1810*, Harriet Guest challenges the oppositional thesis, arguing that, in fact, "domesticity is always a contested proposition," in part because it "fails to secure to women those forms of personal worth which only participation in the labor market offers." Ultimately, she finds that "domesticity gains in value as a result of its continuity with the social or the public, and not only as a result of its asocial exclusion"; intellectual or bluestocking women who have been read simply as advocates of a rigid separation of spheres are therefore in fact working out subtle but influential definitions of their own gender roles and, thereby, of the nature of the political subject.[27] Rereading a number of the celebrations of "female worthies" which figure so consistently in poetry, painting, journalism, and anthologies of the period, and which are the foundation of Ezell's and McDowell's arguments that the domestic confinement and eventual marginalization of women arose here, both Elizabeth Eger and Charlotte Grant have discovered a culturally central, active, and public place for women as leaders in every aspect of the arts, both in the iconography and in the reality of the day.[28] Eger, in particular, suggests an influence of the period's "phenomenal interest in their growing activity" on women writers themselves, concluding that "Their intervention in literary and artistic tradition was inevitably self-conscious, involving a sense of group identity and a commitment to women's education and in the words of Mary Hays, an interest in 'their advancement in the grand scale of rational and social existence.' The future of critical reason appeared to belong to both sexes."[29]

In a stimulating study bringing together a wide array of women's public "performance" with the theory and representation of women's speech, Patricia Howell Michaelson has arrived at the conclusion that women used stereotypes of their relation to the spoken word strategically, "while insisting implicitly that their gender identity was not always the most

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521850606 - The Professionalization of Women Writers in Eighteenth-Century Britain
Betty A. Schellenberg
Excerpt
More information

salient one."[30] Supporting such arguments is a growing understanding of the crucial civilizing role awarded to women in Enlightenment theories of progress, a role which has been identified by Sylvana Tomaselli and which is exemplified in the essays of Hume, as well as in the works of other Scottish Enlightenment philosophers.[31]

THE FEMALE NOVELIST PROBLEM

My study shares these scholars' dissatisfactions with the state of women's literary history for the eighteenth century, but seeks to move understanding forward, not by looking at the roles of women in clearly public domains such as the performing arts, but through a reexamination of a group of women writers who have most often been viewed as epitomizing women's relegation to the domestic sphere, and as displaying the resulting doubleness this relegation forced upon them as aspiring authors. These five authors are Frances Chamberlaine Sheridan (1724–1766), Frances Moore Brooke (1724–1789), Sarah Robinson Scott (1723–1795), Sarah Fielding (1710–1768), and Charlotte Ramsay Lennox (1729[?]–1804). The sense that the "evidence" is created by its interpretive frame for this group in particular can be illustrated briefly by reference to Charlotte Lennox, the most problematic of these writers for those attempting a dichotomous classification of submissive or subversive. Critical attention has focused on Lennox's 1752 novel *The Female Quixote*, which notoriously resolves the problem of its heroine Arabella (who has been deluded by reading French heroic romances into believing that her social world and lifestory conform to their outlines) by having her "converted," through a dialogue with a "Pious and Learned" clergyman, to a recognition of her place as an heiress in her society's economy of courtship and marriage. The ideal fiction to which she is directed as a guide for her own behavior is Richardson's *Clarissa*.

Given the "immodesty" of Lennox's self-assertion as an author, and the vicissitudes of her own unhappy marriage, this orthodox moral cannot, according to our dominant explanatory model, be Lennox's desired solution; either the apparent conservatism is a cover for a radical critique of eighteenth-century marriage practices and ideals of female propriety or it is simply not Lennox's at all. The former position is represented by such readers as Laurie Langbauer, who begins her influential 1990 discussion with the premise that Arabella "comes to exemplify Lennox's own dilemma as a woman writer: the imperative to leave behind the insubstantial world of romance, the only realm in which the woman (writer) is

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press
0521850606 - The Professionalization of Women Writers in Eighteenth-Century Britain
Betty A. Schellenberg
Excerpt
More information

given a place, however illusory." Langbauer argued that the novel celebrates the pleasures of romance, which govern its own narrative, but she was then led to claim that in its conclusion, Arabella's only "escape from romance is to stop being a woman."[32] The difficulty for Langbauer lay in the fact that Lennox's resolution is indeed based on an explicit identification of legitimate fiction with the authority of the male author. The conversion chapter is heavily encrusted with praise of Samuel Johnson, both as "the greatest Genius in the present Age" and as the model in sentiments and style for the "Pious and Learned" clergyman who effects Arabella's cure. Richardson is explicitly authorized here, in contrast to the writers of heroic romances, as "an admirable Writer of our own Time," while his novel *Clarissa* offers its reader "the most solid Instructions, the noblest Sentiments, and the most exalted Piety, in the pleasing Dress of a Novel."[33]

Hence the view that this cannot have been what Lennox really wanted to say. It has been almost a critical commonplace to argue that Lennox was forced by "the censorship of critics" to the "necessity" of disguising her presumed feminism, toeing an orthodox line in order to achieve publication.[34] This position makes feminist literary history ironically continuous with the unsubstantiated claim of traditional criticism that Lennox indeed did *not* write the conversion chapter – Johnson wrote it for her.[35] Not only do both of these explanations of the novel's conclusion – Lennox as subversive-in-hiding and Lennox as author forced to abdicate – require that Lennox be stripped of agency at the most significant moment in her narrative, they are also simply unconvincing when this conclusion is placed against the work of some of her female contemporaries who did find it possible to problematize marriage endings and stories of female reading within the supposedly rigid constraints of the novel of courtship. Lennox chose to write an ending, in short, which does nothing to dismantle the hierarchies of gender and reading upon which her plot is constructed. At best, as Elizabeth Kraft has concluded, while Lennox "discovers . . . the need for a narrative alternative," she does not discover "the form it should take."[36]

I began this project, then, simply by focusing on those women who have repeatedly been identified as the modest novelists of the mid-century. Four of them, indeed, are grouped together by Todd when she notes in passing, while discussing Frances Brooke as novelist of clichéd sensibility, that she, together "with Charlotte Lennox, Sarah Fielding and Frances Sheridan, was much appreciated by Johnson and Richardson." Spencer in turn classifies Fielding with Sheridan and Sarah Scott as typical "women

© Cambridge University Press www.cambridge.org