

Introduction

THE SUBJECT

David Perkins's *Is Literary History Possible?* has been a *vade mecum* for me as I have been writing this book. Perkins explores post-modern challenges to existing conceptions of literature and history that suggest literary history has become impossible. His focus is on the kind of literary history that I have written in this volume: the single author narrative literary history of a national literature like Hippolyte Taine's *History of English Literature* (1863) or Francesco de Sanctis's *History of Italian Literature* (1870–71). Perkins also attends to histories of a particular period within a national literature, devoting a chapter to books and articles that attempt to explain the causes of English Romanticism, to state its important characteristics, and to establish its canon. Examples Perkins does not consider of literary histories closer to my project would include Bonamay Dobrée's *English Literature in the Early Eighteenth Century* (1959) and John Butt's *English Literature: The Mid-Eighteenth Century, 1740–1789* (1979), both volumes in the Oxford History of English Literature series.

Paradoxically, Perkins concludes that such literary history is both impossible to write with intellectual conviction and necessary to read. Among the reasons Perkins and others offer for the impossibility of literary history are that we no longer know what literature is, that designations of literary types like “genres, periods, schools, and movements” now look “baseless and arbitrary,” and that the past itself is not representable.¹ Yet, as he also argues, students still need introductions to bodies of literature and much of the literature of the past is neither adequately intelligible nor enjoyable without the mediation of literary history.

The category literature has seemed increasingly problematic as consensus about which works ought to be in our literary canon or whether there ought to be a literary canon has broken down. Literary history necessarily

exists in a hermeneutic circle with literature. Thus, as canons have broken down, literary history increasingly has an amorphous and shifting subject. Perkins is concerned with general literary history rather than with the history of women's writing or feminist literary history. Over the past few decades, however, feminist critiques of existing canons and feminist scholarship recovering and arguing for the merits of previously uncanonical texts by women have been the most powerful forces transforming what I will call the operative canon, that is, the set of texts being published, commented upon by people trained in literary studies, and taught in departments of literature. Feminist criticism has been ambivalent about whether its goal should be to place works written by women in the literary canon or to extirpate the idea of literary canon. Given that literature has become such a moving target, it is no wonder that Perkins finds literary history impossible.

My position is that we can identify works of literature and that we can write histories of them. Admittedly, the sorts of works considered literary may be somewhat different in different historical periods, but I think a literary history can aim to recognize both the ideas of the literary in the period it treats and the ideas of the literary in the period in which it is written. My literary history in this book includes a wide range of genres with good claims to be considered literature: poetry, drama, essay, biography, memoir, translation, familiar letter, history, travel narrative, and novel. To some readers, some of these forms may seem not a part of literature. Yet Butt in *English Literature: The Mid-Eighteenth Century* quite properly paid attention to essay, biography, memoir, familiar letter, history, and travel narrative, recognizing that contemporaries considered them significant literary genres, indeed, that writers of the period were especially interested in cultivating these nonfictional prose forms. Twenty-first-century readers may notice that these forms are now also of great interest to nonspecialist general readers, as any recent issue of *The Times Literary Supplement* will demonstrate.

Because literary forms other than the novel were important in the Restoration and eighteenth century and because I think that much of women's best writing was in forms other than the novel, the reader may be surprised to find that the novel – apparently at the center of the modern feminist canon – is not at the center of my account. Much of women's most intellectually vigorous writing was in nonfiction prose, not in the novel. Indeed, too often what modern critics have supposed were omnipresent constraints on women writers in this period were merely the conventions of the domestic novel. I agree with Clare Brant's recent

Introduction

3

argument that feminist criticism has been too uncritical of “the orthodoxies of literary history” that direct attention too exclusively to poems, plays, and, especially, novels – although I have already noted that these “orthodoxies” did not constrain good literary historians of eighteenth-century writing like Butt.²

Feminists concerned with women writers often add additional feminist reasons for the impossibility of writing literary history to the reasons Perkins offers. Practically, they point to the ferment in the field and argue that, minimally, it is too early to attempt synthesis. Theoretically, many resist both the necessity of selection and the evaluative criticism required by a literary history. Sharon Harris, in a strenuous and substantial introduction to her anthology, *American Women Writers to 1800* (1996), thoughtfully articulates these skeptical positions. Deeply suspicious of the category literature, Harris includes not only doggerel magazine verse, but also business letters, dying declarations, and petitions (some of which I doubt were written by women). She declares: “I believe it is far too early – if ever necessary – to establish a canon of early American women writers; the discipline of early American studies in general is currently engaged in what might be called a critical flux (a very healthy condition, I would argue) and deserves much more research and development before such considerations come under debate.”³

Like many feminists, Harris is legitimately suspicious of aesthetic standards developed in an hermeneutic circle with a predominantly male canon. She wants to be maximally open to the possibility of alternative aesthetics that might emerge from reflection on women’s writing. Consequently, she is excited by the possibilities of examining nontraditional genres where aesthetic standards have not been established and thus do not as readily condition our responses. These, she points out, “can at times bring a reader to the quite exciting position of having to find an alternative discourse as a means of explaining – to herself and others – what she values in these texts.” Unlike some who merely point to a future when such an alternative aesthetic might be articulated, Harris proposes that what previously had been devalued as “discontinuity” in early women’s journals, seen as “nonliterary,” ought rightly to be valued as “associativeness born of interruptibility.” She re-describes this kind of writing substituting positive terms for negative ones like “discontinuous” and “semi-literate”:

The best of these writers does not want to tie down her thoughts to a linear pattern . . . she allows her mind to rove through multiple associations

and – importantly – when these texts are written to be shared with another, she assumes that her reader will be willing and able to engage in these same fast and fluent mental shifts, grasping the complexity and infiniteness of the ideas engaged and the contingencies of meaning which her style conveys.⁴

I agree with Harris and many other feminist critics that earlier constructions of the canon of Restoration and eighteenth-century literature have wrongly excluded significant and meritorious work by women, but I do not agree with those who think that feminists must jettison the idea of literature or the idea of literary merit. I agree that new aesthetic values can be found in some previously devalued women's writing, but I do not agree with those who contend that we cannot make aesthetic evaluations of literary works that have any use or objectivity. Aesthetic or literary merit is an important principle of selection in my literary history.

It cannot be a sin against feminism to say that some women wrote well and others wrote badly, that some were intelligent, reflective, and original, others dull, unreflective, and formulaic. It has been my experience that many who advance the skeptical position that judgment of literary merit is impossible with respect to works that are objects of their academic study, nevertheless feel able outside their area of scholarly expertise to pronounce on the aesthetic merits of plays or movies they see or books they read. Indeed, they are often satisfied consumers or even writers of evaluative criticism in modern reviews. I do not see why a person like me who has spent the better part of forty years immersed in Restoration and eighteenth-century British literature and history should not be capable of some useful discrimination between a good eighteenth-century poem and a bad one. Several essays in a recent issue of *New Literary History* helpfully defend what one writer describes as the “quasi-objectivity of aesthetic truth.” This writer, Allen Wood, a Stanford philosopher, defends a proposition of Hume's with which I agree: “no sensible person can take seriously the thesis that all painting or poetry, for instance, is of equal aesthetic merit.”⁵

One important claim some seventeenth- and eighteenth-century women writers made was that they were capable of making aesthetic judgments. In a fine essay in the new Cambridge *History of Women's Writing in France*, Faith Beasley observes that the neoclassical French women of the salons challenged existing academic standards of taste and advanced a more worldly sensibility, to be acquired in the heterosocial salons, as a sufficient, even preferable standard of taste.⁶ Many feminist theorists have complained that there was a suspicious coincidence between the discovery of women writers and the proclamation of the death of the

Introduction

5

author; they elected to keep the idea of the author alive. Similarly, it seems to me that it would be a shame to abandon the idea of aesthetic merit just at the moment when we have a real opportunity to demonstrate both women artists' capacity to produce it and women critics' capacity to discern it. We can debate degrees or kinds of aesthetic merit without abandoning the idea that aesthetic merit exists. Some feminist abjuration of evaluative criticism derives from the militant anti-elitism of some feminisms. It may also arise from a feminist "ethic of care" that values nurturance and support rather than criticism.⁷ Yet, sadly, I wonder whether this abjuration of evaluative criticism is not also a product of a lingering womanly reluctance to claim any authority, no matter how useful, well-earned, or justified.

In my view, all writing by women can validly be studied by one scholarly discipline or another – by social history, for example – but it does not follow that all writing by women is the proper object of literary study. In this book, for example, I treat some women's letters. Often these letters were written by women who were self-consciously writing in what they understood to be the literary genre of the familiar letter; they explicitly reflect on the literary merits of earlier writers of familiar letters. Occasionally, the writers were less self-consciously engaged in what they understood to be literary performances, but display an unusual artfulness with language, character, scene, and the relational dynamics peculiar to the familiar letter that I consider makes them literary. The vast majority of women's letters, however, serving more purely instrumental purposes, do not seem to be appropriately part of the subject matter of literature. Thus, although the letters of Martha Daniell Logan to John Bartram that Sharon Harris prints in her anthology are fascinating from the perspective of horticultural history, I do not consider them in my literary history. Similarly, much of the occasional political writing usefully discussed by Paula McDowell in *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics, and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace, 1678–1730* (1998) also lies outside the scope of my history. Like male writers, women writers of this period often produced inept or clichéd poems, or insipid and badly written novels. While sometimes misogynistic, contemporary reviewers' complaints about bad writing were often enough legitimate. My aim in this book is not to consider everything written by women, but rather to emphasize those literary works that were most original, most intelligent, best written, and most significant.

Recent historians of national literatures have been more bothered by the question of what literature is than by the question of what the nation was.

Despite much current scholarly interest in the construction of national identities and national cultures, this work has not yet had much impact on national literary histories. Presumably because America and Britain became separate countries after the War of American Independence, colonial American literature has conventionally been treated as part of American literary history and not as part of British literary history. However, because I believe that a national literary history ought to reflect the actual historical composition of the nation in the period it describes, my literary history considers women writing everywhere in Britain and the British colonies, including North America, so long as those colonies were part of the British Empire. It makes no more sense to exclude American colonial writers from British literary history than it would to exclude Irish writers, who are conventionally included. Thus, the American writers are present in my first six chapters, treating 1660 to 1776, then disappear in the seventh chapter at the point of the War of American Independence. Some of the American writers were self-consciously British patriots; even an oppositional writer like Abigail Adams was very aware of occupying a place within the British imperial system. Including the American writers helps underline the fact that British literature of this period was an imperial literature. It also reminds us that strains of Puritanism, religious dissent, anti-monarchalism, and republicanism that seem in some accounts virtually to disappear from English culture after the Restoration continued to develop offshore. The political radicalism of Catharine Macaulay in England in the 1770s may seem less sudden and surprising when we find Macaulay and the Adamses forming a united front in the 1770s.

My literary history is Janus-faced, one face turned toward the Restoration and eighteenth century, the other toward the twenty-first century. From one perspective, I aim to offer a picture of the literary work of Restoration and eighteenth-century women writers in which they and their contemporaries might recognize themselves and their accomplishments. Therefore, I attend to writers and works celebrated in their own time, even if they have not been of great interest to more recent criticism and may not seem of obvious interest to most twenty-first century readers. Thus, Elizabeth Rowe, whose Christian piety has not appealed much to modern tastes, but who was a critically celebrated and popular writer in her own time, and an inspiration to other women writers, has an important place in my history. So does Elizabeth Carter, who is even easier than Rowe to overlook from a modern perspective, in part because her major work was a translation from the Greek, *All the Works of Epictetus*, translation being a very visible part of the eighteenth-century literary

Introduction

7

system, yet less so of ours. Margaret Ezell in *Writing Women's Literary History* was right to complain that many earlier narratives of feminist literary history too relentlessly insisted on a development from an early feminine writing to a later, better, feminist writing, and ignored or too harshly criticized early women writers who did not attack patriarchy, denying the real diversity of women's writing.⁸

Perkins rightly insists that one function of literary history is “to set the past at a distance, to make its otherness felt.”⁹ Literary history can serve a salutary function in resisting a common impulse of humanist criticism, including feminist humanist criticism, to read all texts of the past as heralding and supporting our modern convictions. Some feminist critics, demonstrating more hermeneutical brilliance than historical imagination, have found subversion of patriarchy lurking beneath the surface of texts of apparently staggering conservatism or even misogyny. Here I have tried to allow these past texts to retain their otherness, so that the reader may experience what Perkins calls “the shock to values, the effort of imagination, the crisis for understanding and sympathy” of an encounter with the past.¹⁰ Because this history considers Restoration and eighteenth-century women's quarrels with one another, it also resists the idea that they spoke with one voice.

The other Janus face of my literary history necessarily looks to our present time, reflecting an emerging canon of women's texts that have spoken most compellingly to modern readers, especially modern feminist critics and readers. The modern canon has especially valued the transgressive writers like Aphra Behn and Delarivière Manley, whose willingness to treat female sexuality and to attack male oppression of women made them appear to be our most useable foremothers. The dominant genre of this modern canon has been the novel, and undergraduates now regularly read Behn's *Oroonoko*, Manley's *Rivella*, Charlotte Lennox's *Female Quixote*, Frances Sheridan's *Sidney Bidulph*, and Frances Burney's *Evelina*. Three important twentieth-century literary histories of women's writing in the Restoration and eighteenth century all made the novel their central focus: B. G. MacCarthy's pioneering and feisty *The Female Pen: Women Writers and Novelists, 1621–1818* (1946–47), Jane Spencer's fine *The Rise of the Woman Novelist: From Aphra Behn to Jane Austen* (1986), and Janet Todd's deservedly influential *The Sign of Angellica: Women, Writing and Fiction, 1660–1800* (1989).

There are real tensions between these two Janus faces of my history, and the reader will have to judge how well I have managed them. The face turned toward the Restoration and eighteenth century sees women's

nonfiction prose, religious writing, and translation as having been more significant than they are in the twenty-first century operative canon (although there are signs that the canon is shifting). The face turned toward our modern canon shares the preoccupation of feminist criticism with constructions of heroinism, with stories of how women came to write of their own experience, and with questions of how women's writing gained cultural authority. As a feminist who has elected to write a history of women's writing, I am drawn toward emphasizing texts that foreground women's experience and texts that seem to represent progressive kinds of gender consciousness. Practically, considering texts that foreground women's experience helps lend some coherence to my own narrative. More theoretically, William Warner was probably correct to say that the question that "motivates virtually all post-Enlightenment feminist inquiry" – including mine – is "how does the female subject who would be free . . . resist or negotiate some compromise with the power of . . . patriarchy . . . in order to win authority, in view of some possible future liberation?"¹¹ Such presentist concerns in feminist and other "minority" literary histories convince some that they are too ideologically driven and too narrow to lay claim to historical objectivity or truthfulness. Perkins, indeed, associates "minority" literary history with Nietzsche's antiquarian history, a mode so driven by desire to support feelings of community identity that it lacks objectivity and insists on celebrating "even mediocre achievements" of its minority with inappropriate "enthusiasm."¹² I do think, as I have indicated, that modern feminist criticism sometimes errs by overpraising mediocre works, supporting praise with inventive but implausible readings.

There is an important tension between my desire to foreground progressive kinds of gender consciousness, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, my desire to represent the full range of women writers' accomplishments, including many that are not about gender. Like Rita Felski, I am wary of reinscribing an essentialism of which feminists have rightly complained.¹³ Thus, with some risk to the coherence of my narrative, I have also emphasized achievements of these writers as diverse as Anne Finch's intervention in the pastoral tradition and Macaulay's advocacy of freedom of the press. Using my historical imagination and what Perkins calls the law of sympathy I have also tried to enter as well as I could into even the more alien concerns of these early texts – like the conundrums Calvinism and Neoplatonism posed for Rowe – to understand what they aimed to accomplish when they were written.

Introduction

9

Without abandoning evaluative criticism, I have tried to articulate sympathetically the merits and claims to attention of individual texts. In particular, considering some women writers who championed “virtue” rather than sexual liberation, I argue that they made virtue a more philosophically serious and interesting concept than modern readers might suspect and that the women writers of what I call “the party of virtue” more powerfully rebutted certain misogynistic assumptions than the transgressive women writers did. In cases where I have less admiration for particular texts than other intelligent modern critics do, I have departed from the usual authoritative stance of literary history to indicate briefly what these other views are and to offer bibliographical citations that will enable the reader to pursue those alternative approaches.

METHOD OF ORGANIZATION

Typically, literary histories that treat multiple genres use genre as a key organizing principle. Butt in *English Literature: The Mid-Eighteenth Century* relies almost entirely on genre, offering separate chapters on drama; history; travel literature, memoirs, and biography; essays; and letters, dialogues, and speeches. Fiction gets two chapters, one for the “Four major novelists” and one for “Other prose fiction.” Poetry gets three chapters: one for poetry 1740–60, one for poetry 1760–89, and one for Scottish poetry. Unlike most users of this conventional genre structure, Butt makes an intelligent effort to justify his choice, arguing, “this was the last age in which writers were seriously affected by the doctrines associated with the traditional literary ‘kinds.’”¹⁴ A central theme of his history is the way “new ‘kinds’ derive from old by different processes, imitative or parodic, to which the biological term ‘mutation,’ may be applied.”¹⁵

I have departed from this usual preference for genre as an organizing principle, choosing instead to organize this book chronologically. I have divided 1660–1789 into seven shorter periods, and begun each chapter with a brief account of significant events of that period and some remarks on its general characteristics. Except for two very minor bits of fudging, I have strictly confined myself in each chapter to considering only works originating in the years covered by that chapter. This has the salutary effect of forcing me to advance only generalizations that such evidence can support. It also advances the argument that women writers were much more engaged with the nondomestic events and ideas of their time than one might suppose from the evidence of the domestic novel.

A. E. Housman, the great classical scholar and poet of *A Shropshire Lad*, in 1915 memorably reviewed the latest volume of the *Cambridge History of English Literature*, one covering *The Period of the French Revolution*. He complained that the volume was insufficiently historical:

History need not adhere to chronology and such anachronisms as the inclusion of Peacock in this volume and the postponement of Scott till the next are shifts of expediency which have no historical importance. But the order of date should be kept when nothing is gained by inverting it. Nothing is gained, nay much is lost, by an inversion which places Wordsworth on p. 93, Crabbe on p. 140, and Blake and Burns on still later pages; for this is an inversion not simply of chronological but of historical sequence. Historically considered, Wordsworth is the pivot of the epoch . . . No poet later born . . . entirely escaped his influence . . . But Burns was dead when the *Lyrical Ballads* were published, and Crabbe might have been dead too for all the good or harm they did him.¹⁶

Housman's advice to adhere to the order of date has seemed to me useful. Not only does it help to place women writers in the historical moments from which their works originated and to emphasize women's engagement with contemporary events and ideas, it makes it easier to discern women writers taking sides on pressing contemporary issues and responding to one another. An enormous amount of the secondary literature on these women writers has been biographical, often finding purely personal causes for apparent shifts in the direction of a particular writer's work. Famously – or perhaps now infamously – Eliza Haywood was supposed to have been driven from the writing of scandal chronicles to the writing of inoffensive novels because she was humiliated by Alexander Pope's satire on her in *The Dunciad*.¹⁷ In this book, I treat Haywood's early work and her later work in separate chapters, suggesting ways in which it was representative of more general trends. Moreover, certain events within the literary system have consequences that help explain phenomena that affect more than one writer. For example, George Colman's managing of the Haymarket Theatre from 1777 to 1788 as a serious rival to Covent Garden and Drury Lane, and the unusual willingness of both Colman and Thomas Harris, manager of Covent Garden, to produce new comedies (rather than tested repertory plays) contributed to the successes of both Hannah Cowley and Elizabeth Inchbald.

One question that has to be settled before an internal chronology can be periodized is the question of what kind of dates are to be primarily considered: dates of authors' births and deaths, dates of composition of works or dates when works were performed or published. In this book I emphasize texts rather than authors' lives, and consequently use dates of