

A LITERARY HISTORY OF WOMEN'S WRITING IN BRITAIN, 1660–1789

Drawing on three decades of feminist scholarship bent on rediscovering lost and abandoned women writers, Susan Staves provides a comprehensive history of women's writing in Britain from the Restoration to the French Revolution. This major new work of criticism also offers fresh insights about women's writing in all literary forms, not only fiction, but also poetry, drama, memoir, autobiography, biography, history, essay, translation, and the familiar letter. Focusing on the texts women created, rather than the lives they led, Staves illuminates the central role women's diverse accomplishments in the art of writing played in the literary history of the period. Authors celebrated in their own time and now neglected, and those more recently revalued and studied, are given equal attention. The book's organization by chronology and its attention to history challenge the way we periodize literary history and insist that we must understand the significance of women's texts in their historical context. Each chapter includes a list of key works written in the period covered, as well as a narrative and critical assessment of the works. This magisterial work includes a comprehensive bibliography and list of modern editions of the authors discussed.

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*To the students of Brandeis University, undergraduate and graduate,
who read these books with me*

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page</i> ix
Introduction	I
1 Public women: the Restoration to the death of Aphra Behn, 1660–1689	27
2 Partisans of virtue and religion, 1689–1702	90
3 Politics, gallantry, and ladies in the reign of Queen Anne, 1702–1714	122
4 Battle joined, 1715–1737	166
5 Women as members of the literary family, 1737–1756	228
6 Bluestockings and sentimental writers, 1756–1776	286
7 Romance and comedy, 1777–1789	362
<i>Notes</i>	440
<i>Recommended modern editions</i>	491
<i>Select bibliography</i>	496
<i>Index</i>	513

Acknowledgments

This book is deeply indebted to the work of other feminist literary critics and scholars who have engaged with texts and authors long virtually ignored or, when noticed, condescended to. I have tried to offer novice readers some guides to this now large body of work, but, as readers more familiar with the subject will understand, given the broad scope of my literary history, my direct references to this secondary literature in my text and in the select bibliography can only mention some of the highlights most important or most relevant to my history. I am grateful for the critical insights and scholarship of those I cite, but also for the contributions to my understanding of the field of many others from whose work I have profited less directly.

Ellen Messer-Davidow and Anthony Winner first suggested that I should write a literary history of women's writing in this period. Their intriguing and elaborately theorized proposal for a collaborative new feminist literary history of British women's writing in all periods eventually proved to be a more complicated project than was practicable, but I appreciate their having engaged me in the challenges they outlined. When this large-scale project was abandoned, Gary Kelly encouraged me, nevertheless, to continue with my part of the history.

Narrative literary histories like this do not lend themselves to being presented in sections as the usual conference papers or journal articles, so I have not presented portions of this volume in the way I would have done for another kind of book. I am, therefore, all the more grateful to Dena Goodman, Simon Dickie, Lincoln Faller, and the Eighteenth-Century Group at the University of Michigan for inviting me to precirculate one chapter to them and for the lively and helpful responses of the members of that group. The Orlando Project's Women and Literary History Conference provided significant discussions of the problems of women's literary history in several countries and periods. I was glad to have been invited to participate and to give a talk entitled "Terminus a Quo, Terminus ad

Quem: Chronological Boundaries in a Literary History,” subsequently published in *Women and Literary History: “For There She Was,”* edited by two of the conference organizers, Katherine Binhammer and Jeanne Wood. Some material from that essay appears in this introduction. I am grateful also to the American Society for Eighteenth Century Studies and to the British Society for Eighteenth Century Studies for invitations to give two plenary lectures. Both offered welcome occasions to consider the methodological issues confronting the feminist literary historian and to participate in useful discussions with colleagues.

Closer to home, as my dedication suggests, I am grateful to the students of Brandeis University who, beginning in 1978, were willing to enroll in my course on “The Woman of Letters, 1660–1800” and to read these texts by women writers with me. Early versions of this course necessarily used texts not then in print. Thus students were compelled to read reproductions of texts I had made on a typewriter and, on occasion, more heroically, to read whole novels on microfilm. Our early experiences of confronting what I came to think of as “naked texts” – that is, texts without any surrounding critical commentary or scholarly apparatus – challenged us to develop our own readings and vividly illustrated how different the experience of reading an uncanonical text could be from the experience of reading a text that has become canonical. While I rejoice that many of hitherto obscure texts of these women writers have now become more canonical, and while I recognize that this literary history is part of the process of their canonization, I hope that we can all also from time to time imagine how we might read our books as naked texts.

Like many teachers of rediscovered books by women writers, I have benefited from responses to them by undergraduates for whom these books by women were the only eighteenth-century books they had yet encountered. The students’ readings and assumptions, especially when contrasted with those of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century critics and readers, again and again illuminated how contested the concept of literary “realism” can be. I have also benefited from opportunities to work with Brandeis graduate students who became interested in these women writers. In the 1980s Cynthia Lowenthal courageously ignored the advice of others that writing a dissertation on Lady Mary Wortley Montagu would be professional suicide. Despite the warnings, she wrote a dissertation which became the first literary critical book on Lady Mary Wortley Montagu and she has flourished in the profession. Most recently, the field has been so transformed that another Brandeis doctoral student, Elizabeth

Acknowledgments

xi

Ellington, could write an excellent feminist dissertation about methodological issues in recent “life and works” books on individual Restoration and Eighteenth-Century women writers – books, of course, in my bibliography for this literary history. It has been a privilege to share the enthusiasms and insights of these graduate dissertation writers, including also Ann Russell Zimmerman, Deborah Kaplan, Edith Larson, Claudia Thomas, Kathleen Grathwol, Pamela Lloyd, Marla Harris, Bea Britton Loprete, Leslee Thorne-Murphy, Cynthia Ricciardi, and Lori Davis-Perry.

I did my graduate work at the University of Virginia, which Thomas Jefferson thought of as an “academical village,” but, since 1967 I have had the good fortune to live near Boston/Cambridge, which is an “academical city.” For many decades, we have enjoyed an Eighteenth-Century Club, in the more recent decades metamorphosed into the Harvard Humanities Eighteenth-Century Seminar. Bringing together faculty and graduate students – and the occasional non-academic – interested in eighteenth-century studies, the club has offered a friendly and stimulating venue for presenting work-in-progress. I am particularly grateful to Ruth Perry (a founder of the Club), to Charles Knight and Arthur Weitzman (among its most faithful and long-term participants), to Lennard Davis and Beth Kowaleski-Wallace (who served at different times as my co-chairs), and to Lynn Festa, who has co-chaired the seminar with me for the last four years. I am also indebted to a still less formal club, one we call the “Bluestockings,” a reading group in which I have had the chance to discuss some of the primary texts included in this history and to present a draft chapter for comment. The current “Bluestockings” are Lynn Festa, Susan Lanser, Mandy Nash Kudaruskis, and Ruth Perry. We all mourn the death of a former member, Jan Thaddeus, whose literary intelligence and broad knowledge of eighteenth-century history and literature added so much to our earlier conversations.

Finally, I welcome this chance to acknowledge important contributions to my happiness and well-being during the writing of this book from a few important friends who – although learned – are not scholars of the eighteenth century: Mary Campbell, Arlan Fuller, Paul Morrison, and Marshall Shatz.