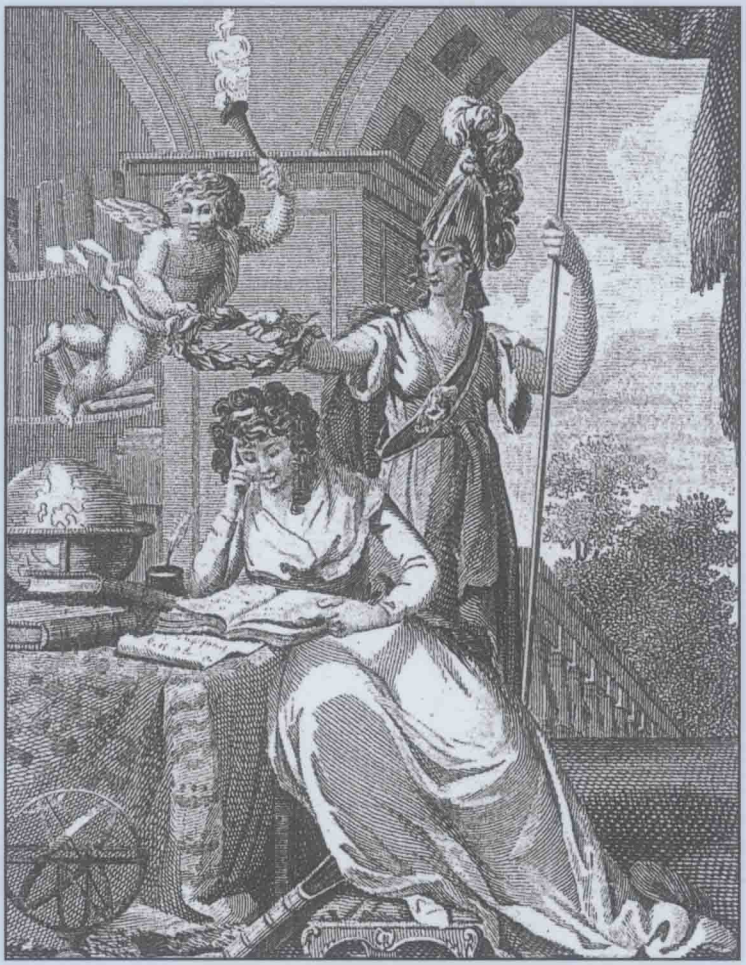
British Women's Writing in the Long Eighteenth Century

Authorship, Politics and History



Edited by
Jennie Batchelor and Cora Kaplan

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Introduction

Jennie Batchelor and Cora Kaplan

In July 2003 over 200 scholars of women's writing in the long eighteenth century attended a conference marking the opening of Chawton House Library and Study Centre in the house and grounds of the restored manor house that once belonged to Jane Austen's brother, Edward. Isobel Grundy, in the last essay in this volume, 'Chawton House: Gathering Old Books for a New Library', explains the genesis and development of the Library, which owes its existence to the literary enthusiasm, creative imagination, practical wisdom and economic generosity of an American benefactor, Sandy Lerner. On that summer day Chawton House, its imposing façade flanked by two large, festive-looking marquees, seemed to celebrate not only the lives and work of the writers housed within it, but the focused intellectual dedication and labours of the several generations of scholars and teachers gathered there.[1]

A testament to the rise in the visibility and status of women writers of this period and to the distinction of the field, the Library is a further affirmation of the acknowledgement that the writers and their critics and chroniclers have received in recent years. Research on early women's writing in English has been for some time a highly respected, lively and expanding field of study, extending the range of authors read and studied in universities beyond the most utopian expectations of feminist critics a quarter of a century ago, as well as finding audiences for their writing and their lives beyond the academy. This successful act of retrieval, republication and interpretation – the ongoing work of many hands – has had a profound impact on eighteenth-century studies itself, so that the issues raised by women's cultural production, and by gender, have been crucial to its own transformation and revitalisation.

The essays in this volume are indicative of the range of current scholarship and the variety of its objects. They deal with famous and

obscure figures, with both men and women, with fiction, poetry, letters, journalism, travel narrative, political polemic and drama from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth century. The book focuses on the interrelated topoi of authorship, politics and history, key themes which have undergone seismic shifts as a result of our ever-deepening knowledge about women's participation in public life, and as a response to the increasing integration of contemporary theory into eighteenth-century studies heralded, for example, by Felicity Nussbaum's and Laura Brown's *The New Eighteenth Century* (1987). This new work, in its turn, has been driven by changes in the political climate of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, changes so profound that they have crucially challenged the ways in which feminist scholars, among others working on women's writing in the long eighteenth century, initially defined their own scholarly investments in the period.

Something of that shift can be understood through the oscillating standing of those better known *fin-de-siècle* figures, Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen and Hannah More. Wollstonecraft's work and life, which had won her such an uncertain reputation for the century and a half following her early death, took on a new and positive significance from the early 1970s onwards. She resurfaces in the 1970s as the leading thinker of Anglo-feminism prior to 1900, with the majority of critics and biographers beginning to embrace rather than apologise for her identification with radical politics and sexual liberty. But as editions of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) and her unfinished novel *The Wrongs of Woman or Maria* (1798) proliferated, must-reads on every women's studies and women's writing book list, a new set of debates about her and in her name arose, paralleling critical differences within late twentieth-century feminist agendas. From the 1970s through the mid-1980s, new attention to Wollstonecraft sought both to contextualise her in terms of late eighteenth-century gender hierarchies and within the radical, dissenting circles in which she moved. Nevertheless, rereading the work of this period, one can also see that Wollstonecraft as an historical icon had become deeply – too deeply perhaps – articulated with the hopes and fears of the second wave of the women's movement. Thus Wollstonecraft was simultaneously reinvented as the foremother of a radical brand of liberalism, a precursor of utopian socialism, a bold forerunner of the sexual revolution and a more bounded and conservative proponent of bourgeois femininity.[2] Similarly, we might say that Jane Austen in this period was caught between two poles – from one point of view a proto-feminist, from another an arch-traditionalist – while Hannah More simply languished for a long time in a kind of political

purgatory, her anti-Jacobin and anti-feminist views ensuring her critical neglect.

Feminism in the 1970s through to the early 1980s often characterised its own divisions through defined political 'tendencies' – liberal, socialist, radical, bourgeois. Each strand, in search of origins and lineage, found past heroines and anti-heroines in what sometimes seem in retrospect too *parti pris* and presentist readings of women writers in Britain in the thirty-year period between the sacking of the Bastille and Peterloo. By the late 1980s, however, the level of optimism about social change, a spirit of hopefulness that had fuelled the twinned energies of both the activist and academic elements of western postwar feminism, had waned, giving way to a much less utopian social and political imaginary. The eighteenth century became less interesting as the gateway to enlightenment and revolution, phenomena questioned from every end of the political spectrum, and ever more significant as the buoyant century inaugurating a robust, if messy, capitalist modernity, a world of indefatigable production and consumption – and rising literacy – in which women writers could and did thrive in spite of the constraints of gender. The expanding research on print culture and the history of the book responds to this new focus on the material as well as the intellectual effects of a widening cultural market. At the same time, new fields of work have developed out of both social movements and wider political concerns: the history of sexuality, colonial and postcolonial studies have deeply inflected research on women writers.

Perversely perhaps, the setbacks and uncertainties about the fate and future of progressive agendas in the West since the late 1980s, including that of feminism, has inspired a more upbeat and an exploratory scholarship on women and on gender in the eighteenth century, encouraging, perhaps, a less tendentious search for origins and identifications, and a more patient, historically attentive approach to the complexity of women's involvement in cultural production than that which characterised the groundbreaking work of prior decades. Recent world events have destroyed the last vestiges of Whig or Enlightenment versions of history – those sustaining illusions of constant progress – which so often underpin even the most sophisticated and historically literate radical agenda. A bleaker vision of our own late modernity has generated a new interest in ethics and rights. It has also supported a deeper curiosity about and a more nuanced and less moralising approach to the politics of earlier historical periods; its effect has been to revise our understanding of what constitutes a radical intervention. As Barbara Taylor's *Mary Wollstonecraft and the Feminist Imagination* (2003) argues so eloquently, we

must rediscover the critical energies in eighteenth-century discourses that have fallen out of favour with our own modernity, such as virtue or religion. This collection, which includes the work of several inter-generations of scholars, both reflects and, we hope, reflects on, the new preoccupations of twenty-first-century scholarly engagement with the eighteenth century.

Public and private spheres

Where women's writing was once seen to occupy the margins of literary culture, it now takes centre stage. It has become more difficult (and surely less desirable) to trace a history of the novel without acknowledging the work of Aphra Behn, Eliza Haywood and Penelope Aubin, or to study Wordsworth's poetry without reference to that of Charlotte Smith. As we become more aware of the complex ways in which women writers responded to and influenced their contemporaries, the once dominant ideology of separate spheres becomes more difficult to uphold. Simultaneously, the interrogation of the categories of public and private by feminist scholars has urged a more expansive and inclusive approach to print culture, able to accommodate the multiple and sophisticated ways in which women participated in politics and in the consumption and production of texts, ideas and commodities.

The critical debate about the validity of the public/private model – perhaps the single most important development in the study of women's writing of the period – was invigorated by the publication in English of Jürgen Harbermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (first published in Germany in 1962). Harbermas's influential model famously characterised the public sphere as a discursive arena in which 'private people' came together as a group to engage in rational debate upon commerce, politics and affairs of state – for 'private people' read male, propertied members of the middling ranks. As many critics have demonstrated, Harbermas's conceptualisation of the public sphere served to relegate women to the confines of the domestic household and denied them a role in the formation of public opinion. While periodicals such as *The Tatler* and *Spectator* – paradigmatic texts in Harbermas's account – and countless conduct books attest to the currency of the languages of public and private in the eighteenth century, historians and literary critics have demonstrated that, in Lawrence Klein's words, there is no single ' "public/private" distinction to which interpretation can confidently secure itself' in the period. Instead, scholars such as Klein and Amanda Vickery have identified a series of publics (such as the *salon* and pleasure garden) which challenge the hegemony of Harbermas's homocentric model.

The danger of such approaches, as the editors of *Women, Writing and the Public Sphere, 1700–1800* (2001) have suggested, is that we merely multiply 'alternative counter-public spheres, which inevitably remain in a competitive relation to the overarching concept of the dominant bourgeois public sphere'.[3] Instead, this important and convincing collection of essays on women's encounters with publicity as intellectuals, celebrities, writers, consumers and producers urges us to question whether 'what we have come to regard as the Enlightenment public sphere was in fact constituted and defined by women as well as men.'[4] As the title of Harriet Guest's *Small Change* (2000) suggests, however, women did not always enter the public sphere with the boldness of a Montagu, Macaulay or Wollstonecraft. According to Guest, '[s]mall changes in the network of meanings that constitute publicity' enabled women to imagine themselves as political citizens even as they shopped or wrote letters.[5] *Small Change* powerfully argues for a more flexible approach to the public/private model by locating domesticity and publicity as a continuum, rather than as distinct and mutually exclusive categories. Anne Mellor's reassessment of the ideology of separate spheres in *Mothers of the Nation* (also 2000) offers an alternative to the more cautious and complex model offered by Guest. Hannah More, the subject of Harriet Guest's essay in this volume, is an exemplary figure for Mellor, a woman who actively participated in the public sphere in her efforts to ameliorate the condition of women and the labouring classes through appropriately feminine and domestic acts of philanthropy and reform.[6]

This compelling body of work suggests new models for understanding women's writing in this period. We can no longer assume, as Paula McDowell has argued, that the public sphere was 'always already masculine or bourgeois'.[7] But as Guest and Nussbaum warn in their contributions to this volume, we must be alert to the ways in which newly emergent paradigms may provide frameworks for reading women's cultural production no less distorted than the rigid public/private binary they supersede. Responding to recent reappraisals of More by Anne Mellor, Anne Stott and others, Guest argues that the rehabilitation of Hannah More as a feminist must still take account of the complex and ambivalent nature of her personal and prescriptive notion of women's public role. Many of the essays in this volume respond to the problem Guest outlines by making their arguments from a position beyond the restrictive binaries of public and private: thus Jennie Batchelor argues that women's labour provides a positive not a negative thematic for Sarah Scott, while Katie Halsey reads *Mansfield Park* as playing out a very distinctive political argument between country Toryism and radical

Jacobin values. But they also move beyond the public/private debate to contest the validity of other distinctions (popular versus polite, body versus mind, radical versus conservative) that have grown up in its wake.

Authorship and print culture

The repositioning of women writers within the cultural mainstream has shed new light on the richness and diversity of literary production in the period. In the past two decades, studies of eighteenth-century women's writing have moved away from the novel to illuminate the many other genres in which women wrote. However, much of this body of work is indebted to revisionist histories of the rise of the novel such as Ros Ballaster's *Seductive Forms* (1989) and Paula Backscheider and John Richetti's *Popular Fiction by Women, 1660–1730* (1996), which signalled the formative role that writers such as Aphra Behn, Eliza Haywood, Delarivier Manley and the still lesser-known Mary Davys and Penelope Aubin played in the formation and development of this popular literary mode. (Since these women wrote plays, poetry, conduct manuals and translations too, these works also belie efforts to approach women's writing through the study of a single genre.) These studies – which represent only a small fraction of the ever-growing body of material on women's fiction in the period – coupled with the explosion of reprints of female-authored texts by Broadview, Penguin and Oxford's *World's Classics* series, have made such writers visible once more. But there is still much work to be done.

The indispensable two-volume *Bibliographical Survey of Prose Fiction*, edited by Forster, Garside, Raven and Schöwerling, contains details of almost 4,000 fictional works in the period between 1770 and 1829 alone, a considerable number of which were penned by women who remain in relative obscurity today. Happily, as Isobel Grundy points out in the closing essay of this volume, just as the development of new methods of printing and distributing texts enabled women's entrance into the world of print in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, so new technologies are enabling scholars to reassess the contribution of women writers of the past. The 145-reel microfilm archive of the Royal Literary Fund – a charitable institution established in 1790 to aid writers in financial distress – provides a fascinating and still largely untapped resource for studying the material conditions of authorship for women writers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, such as Charlotte Lennox, Eliza Parsons and Felicia Hemans. More recent

innovations such as the full-text electronic databases compiled by the contributors to the *Brown Women Writers Project* and Chawton House Library's *Novels Online* initiative are playing an equally vital role in the development of eighteenth-century studies in their efforts to make the works of women writers more widely accessible. At the same time, Sheffield Hallam's *Corvey Women Writers on the Web* and the forthcoming *Orlando Project* provide invaluable new research on the lives, careers and critical reputations of some of the many hundred female authors who wrote in this period.

Many of these initiatives would not have been possible without the development of *The English Short Title Catalogue*. The *ESTC* has dramatically re-mapped our understanding of eighteenth-century literary production in its ongoing effort to catalogue printed works to 1800. This valuable resource signals the narrowness of eighteenth-century studies which focus too rigidly on the novel by demonstrating 'how what might be perceived as "literary" production represents only the tip of the iceberg' of textual output in this period.[8] The database speaks to some of the myriad ways in which women might enter the literary marketplace: not only as novelists, but as writers of plays, poetry, translations, children's books, travel narratives, memoirs, conduct manuals and political works; not only as writers, but as printers, publishers and patrons.

But even this expansive database fails to tell the full story of women's participation in eighteenth-century print culture. Women's contribution to journals and magazines, for instance, remain unacknowledged by the *ESTC*. However, as Judith Hawley's essay on Mary Robinson's work for *The Morning Post*, Moi Rickman's article on Wollstonecraft's review of Samuel Stanhope's Smith's *Essay* for the *Analytical Review* and Norma Clarke's discussion of Anna Seward's war of words with Boswell in the columns of the *Gentleman's Magazine* suggest, periodicals provided an important platform from which women could shape public opinion on matters ranging from literature to politics.

Catalogues and surveys of printed works also fail to accommodate the considerable body of manuscript and unpublished writing by women in the period. As Margaret Ezell has argued, conventional accounts of the history of the book have constructed a misleadingly one-sided narrative of print's triumphant rise from the ashes of amateurish and outmoded practices such as manuscript circulation. In *Social Authorship and the Advent of Print* (1999) Ezell urges a more fluid model for understanding literary culture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, one which views manuscript as a competing and equally valid mode of textual production, rather than as a poor relation to the emergent technology of