

The background of the book cover is a photograph of classical marble statues. Two prominent female figures are shown in profile, facing each other. They have voluminous, curly hair and are wearing draped garments. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the marble.

S E N T I M E N T A L

MEMORIALS



WOMEN AND THE NOVEL IN LITERARY HISTORY

M E L I S S A M A N

Sentimental Memorials

WOMEN AND THE NOVEL
IN LITERARY HISTORY

Melissa Sodeman

STANFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS
STANFORD, CALIFORNIA

Stanford University Press
Stanford, California

©2015 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Junior University.
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system without the prior written permission of Stanford University Press.

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free, archival-quality paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Sodeman, Melissa, 1978- author.

Sentimental memorials : women and the novel in literary history / Melissa Sodeman.
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8047-9132-8 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. English fiction—18th century—History and criticism. 2. English fiction—Women authors—History and criticism. 3. Women and literature—England—History—18th century. 4. Sentimentalism in literature. I. Title.

PR858.W6S77 2014

823'.6099287—dc23

2014028755

ISBN 978-0-8047-9279-0 (electronic)

Typeset by Bruce Lundquist in 11/14 Adobe Garamond Pro

For my family

Acknowledgments

Remembering those who have supported this project is one of the great pleasures in bringing it—at long last—to fruition. I am especially grateful to Felicity Nussbaum, whose unsurpassed dedication to eighteenth-century studies continues to be an inspiration to me. I have benefited greatly from her quick and generous responses to drafts and from her continued support and guidance. Jonathan Grossman suggested new possibilities for my research early on and at critical moments provided encouragement and detailed feedback, often marking up entire white boards as he did so. Not only did his brilliant readings of my work enrich it immeasurably, but he also gave me a new and wider sense of what literary criticism can do, and for that I am more grateful than I can say. Jayne Lewis brought eighteenth-century novels alive for me with her irrepressible enthusiasm; later, she pointed me to *The Recess* and urged me on with well-timed and uplifting comments. Joseph Bristow, Helen Deutsch, and Patrick Coleman offered friendly encouragement along the way. Roxann Wheeler graciously read the manuscript and offered welcome and insightful comments, and her support has meant a great deal to me. Anne Myers's friendship and wry sympathy over the years has done me a world of good. I have benefited from her insightful reading of my work and have learned much from reading hers. Jessica Pressman helped me reconceptualize this project at a critical stage and drew together a key group of readers, Holly Crawford Pickett, Bonnie Foote, and Julia Lee, whose thoughtfulness and humor much enriched this process. Others who deserve kind thanks include Noelle Chao, Kevin Cooney, Ed Gorman and Carol Gorman, Alison Harvey, Nancy Hayes, Nicole Horejsi, Sara Farrell, Chris Loar, Nush Powell, Holly Sanger, Sean Silver, and Erin Templeton.

An Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Fellowship from the Henry E. Huntington Library and a short-term visiting fellowship at the Chawton House

Library helped me bring this project to completion. I would especially like to thank the staff at the Chawton House Library, particularly Gillian Dow, Jacqui Grainger, Sarah Parry, and Corinne Saint, for making my stay in Chawton so idyllic, and to thank the other fellows, especially Fran Scott and Susan Allen Ford, for enriching my time there with lively conversations about Charlotte Smith and Jane Austen. Coe College supported my research with various grants. I am particularly grateful for a Pochobradsky Research Grant that funded a research assistant, Julia Pillard, of whose diligent efforts I am deeply appreciative, and for a grant from Marie Baehr, the Dean of Faculty at Coe College, which helped support the book's publication. Reproductions of the Scales of Genius in Chapter 4 were supplied by the British Library and are reprinted courtesy of The British Library Board. A version of Chapter 1 previously appeared in *Modern Philology* 110, no. 2 (2012): 253–72, ©2012 by The University of Chicago, and part of Chapter 3 appeared in *ELH* 76, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 131–52. This previously published material appears with the permission of The University of Chicago and the Johns Hopkins University Press. I am grateful as well to my editor at Stanford University Press, Emily-Jane Cohen, for her support of this project and for smoothly steering it through the publication process. My two readers, Emily Hodgson Anderson and Devoney Looser, supplied thoughtful and encouraging reports and were invaluable interlocutors through the revision process.

Most of all, I am grateful to my family for their generosity and continuing support. In their different ways, Brian and Erica, Robin and Charley, and my parents have taken pride in my work and encouraged me along the way. Miranda, Cecily, and Hazel have lifted my spirits with countless diversions and much mischief. Finally, Richard Sprague has lived with this project nearly from its inception and deserves credit for never tiring of these novels. His unfailing patience, encouragement, and love has made this book possible.

Sentimental Memorials

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
Introduction	i
1. Sophia Lee's Historical Sensibility	19
2. Reading and Remembering Ann Radcliffe	47
3. Charlotte Smith's Literary Exile	79
4. Mary Robinson and the Wreath of Fame	113
Epilogue	145
<i>Notes</i>	151
<i>Index</i>	183

Introduction

When Theresa, the bookish heroine of Elizabeth Sophia Tomlins's *The Victim of Fancy* (1786), visits Milton's grave, she is flooded by indescribable feelings and extravagant sensations awakened by an imagined connection with one of the period's most revered authors. "I have kissed the neglected receptacle of the bones of Milton," she announces breathlessly, before going on to confess,

I have wetted his grave with the enthusiastic tears of admiration. I have before beheld his bust with pleasure, even where so many imaginary heroes and poets have found place; but the spot which really conceals his last venerable remains, seemed for a moment to infuse his spirit into my breast: I felt superior to the beings which surrounded me, and could almost have fancied that I heard those harps for ever strung, with which he has represented the angels of heaven. I looked on the stone, and my heart felt emotions which I am not able to describe.¹

While Theresa's fantasy of being inspirited by Milton—complete with harp music—suggests how her intensely felt literary responsiveness reaches a fever pitch at Milton's tomb, her enthusiasm for a literary canon still in the mak-

ing is palpable on nearly every page of Tomlins's novel. Theresa, after all, quotes Shakespeare and succumbs to "Werteromania" (VF 97). She waxes rhapsodic on the subject of literary genius, admitting, "I hear the voice of genius, my heart vibrates to its sound" (VF 9).

Yet if Tomlins's heroine has learned to revere a poet as canonical as Milton, she is puzzled at how to respond when, across the crowded Pump Room at Bath, she spies Sophia Lee, recently catapulted to fame by the success of her sentimental novel *The Recess* (1783–5). Theresa is initially put off by the attention Lee attracts: "And this then, thought I, is the *Temeraire*, whose name has been publicly joined with that of one of the first female writers of our age!" (VF 36). Her response reflects the ambivalence typical of contemporary assessments of sentimental fiction, for at this point Theresa has not yet read Lee's novel. Framing Lee as "the *Temeraire*" or the audacious one, Theresa views Lee as a literary newcomer who has dared to challenge Frances Burney's position as the leading female novelist of the age. Doubting whether anyone "should be ranked with the writer of *Cecilia*" (VF 36), she takes for granted Burney's exceptionalism among a crowd of seemingly inferior women novelists. It is only after reading *The Recess*—which leaves her so overcome with feeling she spends three days in bed recovering from it—that she finds Lee deserves her literary fame. Confessing that once she began *The Recess* she could not put it down, Theresa describes its language as having "all the fire and all the softness of poetry" (VF 56), elevating Lee's work by associating it with a more venerated genre.

Theresa's dilemma—the problem of what to make of a popular novelist like Sophia Lee—illuminates the uncertain position of sentimental novels and the women who wrote them at the end of the eighteenth century. In setting Theresa's ardent love of Milton against her initial ambivalence toward Lee, Tomlins reflects on what changes in the cultural status of literature would mean for women novelists. While at mid-century Samuel Johnson could define literature as "learning" or "skill in letters," as the years wore on, it came to denote a narrower range of imaginative writing before finally becoming identifiable with a still more select canon. As literature was set apart as a body of inspired, original, and culturally valued works, shifts took place that redefined notions of authorship, established criteria for evaluating literary works, and consolidated legal protections for authors. Sentimental novels like *The Victim of Fancy* mediated these changes—which had far-reaching implications for women novelists—in their pages. In the final decades of the eighteenth century, women novelists like Tomlins turned the

sentimental novel to new purposes, recording and metacritically reflecting on the transformations then reshaping literature.

This book is about those transformations. It argues that sentimental novels of the 1780s and 1790s reflect on and provide ways of thinking about the conditions of cultural and literary survival; the selection, retrieval, and assessment of past works; the establishment of fundamental principles of critical judgment; the evaluations and exclusions of a national literary canon; the development of professional modes of authorship; and the valorization of genius and originality. Read this way, the excesses of late-century sentimental novels—long decried for their riotously improbable plots and over-the-top feeling—register the strain produced by the disciplinary reorganization of literature at the end of the eighteenth century.

Drawing together areas of inquiry that have not often been brought to bear on one another, I put the history of the novel and women's literary history in conversation with book history to better read the situation of later eighteenth-century women novelists. Despite the undisputed significance of this era for book historians—we now recognize the later eighteenth century as the period in which literature in its modern sense came into being as well as one in which reading practices shifted, literary values changed, and authorship became increasingly professionalized—its popular fiction has slipped out of our histories of these developments. In part, this may be due to our own sense, borrowed from this period, that popular sentimental novels have little to do with the more august realms of literature. Certainly this view was commonplace in the later eighteenth century. However innovative it had seemed in the hands of Samuel Richardson, Laurence Sterne, and even Henry Mackenzie, by the 1780s, sentimental fiction no longer enjoyed its earlier cachet and had, by the 1790s, become something of a national literary embarrassment. Though it had played a crucially important role in the history of the early novel, and though it was still the most fashionable novelistic mode in the later eighteenth century, sentimental fiction lost ground as literature was elevated and as sentimental writing became, like the novel more generally in the 1780s, the purview of women.² I argue that novels by Sophia Lee, Ann Radcliffe, Charlotte Smith, and Mary Robinson memorialize the literary-historical conditions of their writing. Their works record a moment in literary history in which sentimental fiction was never more popular and never less admired, a moment in which women writers successfully navigated the professional marketplace but struggled to position their works among more lasting literary monuments. And as later

sentimental novels archive women's different relations to literary history, they also make art out of those relations. Their documentary and aesthetic responses provide us with ways of rethinking the signal literary developments of the later eighteenth century even as they transfigure them into something new. By reading later sentimental novels within the history of the transformations reshaping literature, we may not only shed new light on late-century fiction, but also on the history of literature itself.

To some extent the decline of the sentimental novel coincided with the cultural devaluation of sensibility at the end of the eighteenth century.³ Three years after Hannah More raised the worrying possibility in *Sensibility: A Poetic Epistle* (1782) that the "tender tones" and "fond tears" of sensibility could be feigned,⁴ Mackenzie confessed his disillusionment with sentimental fiction in an essay for the *Lounger* that held sentimental fiction largely responsible for what he saw as the literary undervaluation of the novel. There he took umbrage at "that species called the *Sentimental*" for inculcating false morals and thereby damaging the novel's standing.⁵ But the cultural decline of sensibility tells only part of the story. The fall of sentimental fiction also occurred as it became the purview of women, for while writers like Sarah Fielding and Elizabeth Griffith had worked concurrently with Sterne and Mackenzie to shape the genre at mid-century, by the 1780s sentimental fiction had become the province of women. Though reviewers mentioned this shift as early as 1773, when the *Monthly Review* announced, "This branch of the literary *trade* appears, now, to be almost entirely engrossed by the Ladies," bibliographic research has shown that it was not complete until the late 1780s, when a slight but growing majority of novels were written by women, a situation that held until the 1820s.⁶ And as the novel, like sentimental literature, was taken up by women, its decline was so precipitous that by the early 1790s female authors who wished to be taken seriously began to distance themselves from its excesses. In their different ways, Clara Reeve and Mary Wollstonecraft disavowed sentimentality even as they set about reforming its conventions in their own works. As Reeve noted in her 1791 preface to *The School for Widows*, the "rage for SENTIMENT" has created a demand for "whining, maudlin stories, full of false sentiment and false delicacy, calculated to excite a kind of morbid sensibility."⁷ Admitting that her own fiction "is written more to the heart than the head," she nevertheless aims at realigning sensibility and virtue and, implicitly, at redeeming sentimental fiction.⁸ And while Wollstonecraft dismissed what she characterized as "flimsy works" and "stale tales . . . all retailed in a sentimental

jargon," her own novels sought in their different ways to rewrite the conventions she railed against.⁹

This sense of the degradation of sentimental fiction owed as well to the novel's burgeoning numbers. "Novel reading is now the only taste of the day," the *Trifler* observed in 1796, and in recent years bibliographic research has documented a surge in novel production in the last decades of the eighteenth century.¹⁰ Though obsolescence had long stalked the early novel, on or about 1785 its fortunes changed. Publication rates took off, and between 1785 and 1799, 990 new titles appeared, more than twice the number published in the previous fifteen years.¹¹ During the same period, women published more novels than men, in part because of the remarkable productivity of some individual authors like Charlotte Smith.¹² Even as the number of new novels spiked, most readers found novels prohibitively expensive to purchase and opted to read them through circulating libraries.¹³ The close association between novels and circulating libraries through this period damaged the reputation of the latter, which were viewed with concern by those who saw them as dispensaries of cheap fiction to an addicted public. Apparently destined to be quickly read and tossed aside, novels, for all their bulk, came to seem faddish and evanescent, short-lived works that were all too easily dismissed as, in Anna Letitia Barbauld's words, "ephemeral publications which . . . live their day, and are then buried in oblivion."¹⁴ (Barbauld herself, of course, thought more highly of the novel, and her fifty-volume collection *The British Novelists*, first published in 1810, played a key role in shaping an emerging novelistic canon in the early nineteenth century, in part by protesting critical assumptions that the genre had "a better chance of giving pleasure than of commanding respect."¹⁵) For many eighteenth-century commentators, however, the sheer number of new novels—most of which were unabashedly sentimental, gothic, or some amalgamation of the two—seemed to have depleted the genre's possibilities. As early as 1752, the *Monthly Review* complained, "All the variety of which this species of literary entertainment is capable, seems almost exhausted, and even novels themselves no longer charm us with novelty."¹⁶ Similar complaints were made by reviewers for decades to come.¹⁷ According to one commentator, novels were less original compositions than mechanically produced goods: "When a manufacture has been carried on long enough for the workmen to attain a general proficiency, the uniformity of the stuffs will render it difficult to decide on the preference of one piece beyond another." This critic went on to compare present "workmen" against the skilled artisans of earlier decades:

“Richardson, Fielding, Smollet [*sic*], and Sterne, were the Wedgwoods of their days; and the imitators that have since started up in the same line, exceed all power of calculation!”¹⁸ Late-century novels, in this assessment, have been cranked out by hacks whose works pale in comparison to more original achievements of prior decades.

The surge of new novels was accompanied by a sharp increase in the number of titles published each year. In 1791, the bookseller James Lackington argued that “more than four times the number of books are sold now than were sold twenty years since,” and there is some evidence to corroborate his claim.¹⁹ The uptick in book production was furthered by *Donaldson v. Becket*, a 1774 decision by the House of Lords that put an end to the practice of perpetual copyright.²⁰ The decision, hailed by Trevor Ross as the moment when “literature in its modern sense began,” contributed to the formation of a British national canon by increasing the production of uniformly printed and modestly priced multi-volume series of classic (and mostly out-of-copyright) works.²¹ For Michael Gamer, the years after the 1774 decision “constitute, if not an Age of Canonization, a span of years in which venture publicists . . . became canon-builders by reprinting British authors on an unprecedented scale.”²² As such collections proliferated, they helped to install a recognizable, though not entirely monolithic, canon in the minds and shelves of British readers. While this canon was not fixed, and the writers included varied somewhat from collection to collection, it centered on the works of male poets and playwrights.²³

The effect of the 1774 decision was twofold on the novelists I study here. Not only were professional writers working during the last quarter of the eighteenth century acutely aware that their works competed with older texts that were marketed as having lasting literary value, but they also had cause to worry that curtailing the copyright period would lower the prices they could command for their works. In *A Modest Plea for the Property of Copy Right* (1774), Catharine Macaulay noted that if booksellers could not obtain a perpetual copyright in the works they purchased, they might lose their incentive to publish important or controversial works whose value might be fully realized only over many years. Consequently, she feared, authors would be unable to command fair prices for works that were not readily marketable, while hacks who churned out “trifling amusements” would flourish.²⁴ Though her dire prediction that *Donaldson v. Becket* would “not only be disadvantageous, but ruinous to the state of literature” was not vindicated by history,²⁵ her concern that authors’ compensation would be determined

by the fashionability or topicality of their wares was shared by others. In a pointed send-up of the literary marketplace in Mary Robinson's 1799 novel *The Natural Daughter*, a bookseller tells an aspiring author that,

if your fertile pen can make a story out of some recent popular event, such as an highly-fashioned elopement, a deserted, distracted husband, an abandoned wife, an ungrateful runaway daughter, or a son ruined by sharpers . . . or any thing from real life of equal celebrity or notoriety, your fortune is made; your works will sell, and you will either be admired or feared by the whole phalanx of fashionable readers.²⁶

In the final decades of the eighteenth century, professional novelists had a newly sharpened sense that their livelihoods depended on writing readily marketable or topical works, as a flood of novels that advertised their modernity in titles like *A Tale of the Times*, *Things as They Are*, or *The World as it Goes* would seem to evidence.²⁷

Later sentimental novels thus chart what it means to write in an era in which, in Andrew Piper's words, "there are suddenly a great deal more books to read, when indeed there are *too many* books to read."²⁸ The outpouring of new novels and uniform collections of revered works shaped the professional choices made by late-century novelists no less than the narrative and formal strategies of their works. Professional writers striving for respectability or lasting literary reputations aligned their works more with the ranks of literature than the dreck of the circulating library, as the letters of Charlotte Smith indicate. Take, for example, a letter comically narrating an encounter with William Lane, who soon would soon be renowned as the brash founding proprietor of the Minerva Press. Lane's establishment, which produced approximately one-third of the novels printed in London in the 1790s, was a notorious novel manufactory that churned out sensational, cheaply printed works.²⁹ In her letter, Smith describes Lane as "a vulgar fat Man" who has called on her to solicit her second novel, *Ethelinde* (1789), assuring her that whatever sum she has been promised by Thomas Cadell, the highly respected publisher of her previous works, he will double it. Smith mocks Lane's effrontery, and while she goes on to bemoan the poverty that has made her prey to such "pert advances," her letter displays the care she took with her professional reputation.³⁰ For Smith, who began her career as the genteel author of *Elegiac Sonnets*, a well-received collection of poems, novels represented a means of supporting her large family. Yet dire as her financial hardship was, it did not mitigate her need to bolster her literary reputation,

especially in the early years of her career, by working with Cadell, a publisher whose exclusivity was visible in the select list of novelists he worked with, a list that in the 1780s included Frances Burney and Sophia Lee.

A similar self-consciousness is evident in the period's fiction. Designed to appeal to the broad market demand for certain (sentimental and gothic) modes of fiction, and intensely aware of the elevation of a national literary canon that for the most part excluded the novel, late-century novels straddle fissures that had begun to open up between popular and culturally privileged modes of writing.³¹ While these changes were not complete until the nineteenth century, the cultural devaluation of the sentimental novel left women novelists stranded. For professional novelists who needed to support themselves, the marketability of sentimental fiction held an unmistakable allure, but for those who sought literary recognition, its ephemerality exacted a cost. Stuck with a genre that was often disparaged as circulating-library trash, late-century women novelists made art out of what seemed only to ensure their literary dispossession.

My approach to these long-maligned novels builds on and diverges from other studies of the novel in the later eighteenth century. This is a body of fiction that, as Claudia L. Johnson and others have observed, was long dismissed by Ian Watt and others for its "sentimentalism" and "gothic terror," regrettable propensities that made it a somewhat embarrassing detour on the high road to formal realism.³² In his important history of sentimental fiction, R. F. Brissenden followed Watt's lead, writing dismissively, "It is after the publication of *A Sentimental Journey* in 1768 that the mildew begins to spread across the surface of the novel."³³ More recently, late-century novels have been recuperated by critics like Marilyn Butler, Gary Kelly, and Johnson, who have positioned them within the turbulent years following the French Revolution and found in their pages important political interventions.³⁴ Other scholars, including John Mullan, G. J. Barker-Benfield, Ann Jessie Van Sant, Markman Ellis, and Lynn Festa, have turned to sentimental literature to illuminate the cultural history of sensibility and its links to Britain's growing consumer society, expanding empire, and abolitionist movement.³⁵ Certainly I am much indebted to critics who have explored the political, economic, and social dimensions of sentimental novels. But, reading sentimental fiction differently, I aim to show how these novels meaningfully respond to changes in the cultural status of literature, authorship, and sentimentality at the end of the eighteenth century, changes that stranded sentimental genres and left their mostly female practitioners on

the margins of literary history. The result of these changes, so transparent to us in hindsight, was what Clifford Siskin has termed the Great Forgetting, the gradual elision of sentimental fiction—and consequently of many women writers—from emerging notions of literary canonicity.³⁶ Within our critical histories of the Great Forgetting, the women who were to be forgotten seem all but unaware of the changes that were relegating sentimentalism to the margins of literary history. In part, this has been because the Great Forgetting has seemed to be a nineteenth-century development, part of the reorganization of knowledge that took place with the rise of literature as a discipline and, more precisely, with the establishment of what F. R. Leavis would call the Great Tradition.³⁷

But if this “disciplinary disappearance” of women was a later phenomenon, it was also an evocative repetition, and further institutionalization, of changes apparent at the close of the eighteenth century.³⁸ In 1785, protesting what she saw as the marginalization of women writers and, especially, women novelists, Frances Brooke claimed that recent developments had conspired “to exclude [women] from the road of literary fame,” despite the special talent for fiction writing that she claimed for her sex based on their “quick sensibility, native delicacy of mind, [and] facility of expression.”³⁹ While women writers enjoyed previously unmatched professional opportunities in 1785, Brooke’s comment indicates that such opportunities were given at the expense of literary distinction. Though women were publishing at greater rates than ever before, and though many took advantage of the professional opportunities afforded them by the literary marketplace, publishing novels as well as poems, plays, essays, memoirs, travel writing, magazine fiction, histories, conduct manuals, children’s literature, and translations, their works did not receive the marks of public recognition reserved for other, more culturally valued forms of writing. After all, the great literary history of the age, Thomas Warton’s *History of English Poetry* (1774–81), made little mention of women’s literary achievements. Neither were women writers taken more seriously in a number of influential critical discussions of prose fiction, for Vicesimus Knox, Hugh Blair, James Beattie, and John Moore managed in their different works to disregard novels by their female compatriots.⁴⁰ Nor were women’s works included in the multi-volume collections of English poetry and drama that offered Britons their national literary tradition packaged in aesthetically pleasing—and gratifyingly substantial—volumes.⁴¹ And neither were monuments to women writers included in what had become, by the later eighteenth century, the