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*Revamping Literary History*

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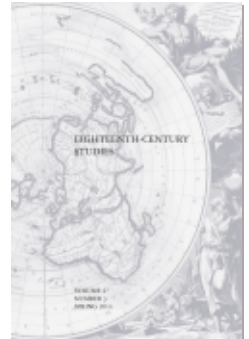
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## Revamping Literary History

Ruth Perry

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## REVIEWS

*Edited by Carolyn C. Guile*

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### Revamping Literary History

Jennie Batchelor, *Women's Work: Labour, Gender, Authorship, 1750–1830* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press and Palgrave, 2010). Pp. x + 249. £60.00

Susan Carlile, ed., *Masters of the Marketplace: British Women Novelists of the 1750s* (Bethlehem, PA: Lehigh University Press, 2011). Pp. 277. \$60.00

Both books under review here are about women writers of the eighteenth century: Susan Carlile's edited collection, *Masters of the Marketplace*, focuses on four from the 1750s—Eliza Haywood, Charlotte Lennox, Sarah Scott, and Sarah Fielding—and Jennie Batchelor, in her *Women's Work: Labour, Gender, Authorship, 1750–1830* compares the women authors of this decade to those later in the century. Carlile's collection insists on how professionally successful these writers women were, and how influential in determining the direction of the novel. Batchelor investigates how women thought about their literary labors and how these perceptions evolved over the course of the century. Both books seek to augment traditionally male-centered literary history and to provide new ways of understanding the contribution of gender to the construction of the novel.

Batchelor's *Women's Work* looks closely at the careers and texts of Sarah Scott, Charlotte Smith, and Mary Wollstonecraft, asking how they presented their authorship in a context in which, increasingly, genteel women were expected not to work. How did they construct heroines who were "born to leisure but compelled to work" (6)? Batchelor includes a final chapter devoted to petitioners to the Royal Literary Fund which further illustrates how women writers thought of themselves at the end of the century, or at least how they packaged their achievements and ambitions for this charity.

Each of the writers Batchelor examines construed her authorship differently, partly as a result of different individual circumstances but also in response to changes in literary culture. Sarah Scott, in the 1750s, projected women's authorship as a gift to the world. More than any other women writer, including Sarah Fielding, says Batchelor, Scott defended the work they did as "individually enfranchising and culturally necessary" (25): "Whether it is Cornelia in the brothel offering her story to a rakish would-be client who will be her devoted servant from that moment on, or Sabrina, in an inversion of the Scheherazade myth, attempting to save her mistress through the telling of tales, or Mrs. Alton performing the work of gratitude in relating her story to Ellison, the act of narration is presented in Scott's novels as a force for good" (63).

For Charlotte Smith, authorship was a means to self-possession, a way to assert "'property' in her texts and her person" (103). Batchelor argues that Smith created the image of herself as a long-suffering wife of a ne'er-do-well who took her earnings, forced to write novels to support her children. Smith projected the effort involved in maintaining a literary career in order to seem a reluctant author, driven by necessity to produce novels. She also insisted on the physical effort of the work, that it was not just the effusions of genius. In the decades during which Smith was writing, Batchelor reminds us, literary careers were being professionalized (as can be seen in debates over copyright and the rise of literary reviews) as well as masculinized. Smith's response to this cultural shift was to emphasize in her prefaces, footnotes, and semi-autobiographical plots the domestic labor that "both occasioned and impeded her literary career" (91), and to insist upon what hard work it all was.

By the time Wollstonecraft was writing, although "labor" had become a central term in political commentary, women's exclusion from professional work made it harder to refer to their own textual production as such. Increasingly marginalized within the labor market, women's expected place in the national economy was reduced to that of consumers or commodities themselves, rather than productive laborers. Wollstonecraft accordingly called for "women to be allowed more meaningful—that is to say, more economically viable and more socially useful—roles within the division of labour" (115). But by focusing on intellectual labor, Batchelor says, Wollstonecraft privileged the work of middle-class women at the expense of that done by those of the laboring class.

As I reflect on the usage of the word "work," I realize that in my own academic lifetime, the word has changed its meaning. Since the 1980s, we have spoken of someone's "work" as meaning not only his or her writings, but the entire project: the orientation, the materials, the angle of vision, the effortful thinking, and so on, as well as what is actually published. This collective noun, "work," was not used previously in academic discourse. One referred to another scholar's influence, ideas, or publications; her collected or selected works, of course, but not her "work"—that is, the subjects she had chosen to investigate and the way she had gone about it and how she had published the end results of her cogitations and researches. Jennie Batchelor is too young to have noticed this contemporary change in nomenclature over the last four decades, but it is precisely this sort of linguistic and ideological change that she is tracking in eighteenth-century discourses about women's work and women's writing.

In her last chapter, on applicants to the Royal Literary Fund, Batchelor tells us something of the history of this charity for impoverished writers. Opponents initially charged that the fund would create more writers of frivolous works—

that the unworthy would write bad novels in order to qualify for handouts—just as in our own day opponents of welfare have charged that poor women would deliberately have more children in order to qualify for the pittance offered in aid to them. Between 1790 and 1797, ninety-four out of 105 applicants to the fund were men. In this climate, women's writing—especially popular novels—was increasingly constructed as the degraded “other” against which professional male authorship was contrasted. In their petitions, women's self-representations stress their authorial reluctance—how they had been pushed to write by necessity, their texts dashed off quickly. They call attention to themselves as distressed mothers rather than distressed geniuses, which Batchelor suggests reflected what they were expected to feel, or say, as much as what they might actually have felt about their own creativity.

Batchelor's careful tracking of the way in which the discourse of literary authorship came to reinforce the social constructions of gender will help us to historicize what we know about women writers, and to reinterpret what they said about their authorial labors. A well-researched book, intelligently written with moments of real eloquence, it is a pleasure to read.

*Masters of the Marketplace*, with its deliberately gender-bending title, does for women writers of the 1750s what Jerry Beasley's *Novels of the 1740s* (1982) did for the male writers of that earlier decade. Susan Carlile argues that the women writers of this period (Eliza Haywood, Charlotte Lennox, Sarah Scott, Sarah Fielding) have received less attention than they deserve, and that although previous critics have argued that “publishing women had to conform to conventional patriarchal ideals” (14), these authors displayed more ambition, intellect, and capacity—and acted with greater agency in the literary marketplace—than they have been given credit for. Carlile's introduction claims that women authors were in the forefront as innovators along with Henry Fielding and Samuel Richardson. Moreover, she makes the telling point that “in novels written by both men and women, the presence during this period of literate and literary heroines, like Richardson's Harriet in *Sir Charles Grandison*; Lennox's Harriot Stuart, Arabella, and Henrietta; Henry Fielding's Mrs. Atkinson, in *Amelia*; and Haywood's Jenny Jessamy,” testify to the high valuation of women's intellect (18). The heroines, she says, even if not explicitly literary, were as a group “quick-witted, independent, aware, and impressively analytical” (22). She adduces the half-dozen works of the 1750s celebrating women writers, including George Ballard's *Memoirs of Several Ladies of Great Britain* (1752) and John Duncombe's *The Femiinad* (1754), to show that in this decade women were more appreciated and more integrated into English literary life than has been hitherto recognized.

Carlile also states that “women and men wrote nearly an equal number of novels between 1750 and 1760” (11), a startling claim that sent me to the footnotes. James Raven, whose bibliographical survey Carlile cites, wrote that “Only 14 per cent of all new novel titles published between 1750 and 1769 can be identified as by women writers. Moreover, even if all the titles that remain anonymous are assumed to be by women (hardly likely), and this total is added to the known number of titles by female writers, the combined total (58 per cent) far from overwhelms the remaining number of novels (42 per cent) known for certain to be by male writers” (48). But the measure Carlile is using, as she explains in a footnote, is the forty-three new novel titles with identifiable authors published between 1750 and 1760 “which later appeared in a second edition indicating some degree of success” (43). Of these, nineteen were written by women and twenty-two by men. As always, much depends on interpretation.

The dozen essays that follow this bold and lively introduction are all competent, and some are excellent. All but one were written for this collection, they cross-reference one another, and there is a good index. It is gratifying to see how much good work is being done by this generation of feminist scholars.

Aleksondra Hultquist's "Marriage in Haywood; or, Amatory Reading Rewarded," argues that Haywood's works challenge the concept of marriage as a reward for virtue, instead teaching readers to think critically about marriage and its meaning for women. She argues that *Betsy Thoughtless*, for instance, was not compromised by "changing ideologies or market demands" as some have argued, but, consistent with Haywood's earlier works, shows "how women grow to maturity through marriage and experience" (44).

Eve Tavor Bannet's fascinating "Lives, Letters, and Tales in Sarah Scott's *Journey Through Every Stage of Life*" reads Scott's novel alongside her correspondence with her sister, Elizabeth Montagu—and shows how the texts "echo, intersect and answer one another" (61). Working from the complete Montagu collection of letters, Bannet clarifies how this correspondence was censored and obscured in editions by their descendents and how many of our received ideas—such as that the sisters were estranged and that "Sarah was somehow abandoned and 'thrown upon the world'"—derive from this corrupted record (66).

Kathleen M. Oliver's "Sarah Fielding's *Lives of Cleopatra and Octavia* and the British Historical Novel" grapples with this author's extreme generic innovation, claiming *Cleopatra and Octavia* as an early historical novel. Emily C. Friedman's essay suggests that Fielding's generic experiments were attempts to educate her audience in literary nuance. Of Fielding's collaboration with Jane Collier on *The Cry*, she opines shrewdly that "one is inclined to think that Fielding made it subtle and Collier made it sting" (189). Katharine Beutner asks us to pay attention to the convention of "story sharing"—women telling each other their life stories—in *The Female Quixote* and elsewhere, which bears thinking about. Patricia L. Hamilton's beautifully written "Arabella Unbound: Wit, Judgment, and the Cure of Charlotte Lennox's *Female Quixote*" reads the moral of that text as being not how dangerous reading romances is for young women, but about how they need experience to test reality and ought not to live so confined.

Jennie Batchelor's "The 'latent seeds of coquetry': Amatory fiction and the 1750s Novel" asks us to rethink the "rejection" of earlier women's amatory fiction on the part of mid-century women writers. Working from the scene in Lennox's *Henrietta* in which the heroine selects *Joseph Andrews* from her landlady's collection to read (for the fourth time), rather than Manley's *New Atalantis*, Batchelor claims that Henrietta's choice is "not so much a badge of honor, but a sign of the heroine's naivety" (149). What subsequently happens to her in that landlady's house might have been foreseen and forestalled had she read Mrs. Manley's novel. In other words, Lennox recognizes what is valuable in earlier amatory fiction. Kathryn King refers to Batchelor's essay in her own piece on Haywood's immense influence, as evidence that women novelists at mid-century were indebted to earlier amatory fictions as a "repository of amatory codes, conventions, topoi, plotlines, characters, and assumptions that, ostensibly disavowed, in fact served as a kind of shared imaginative archival resource for novelists, male and female, throughout the century" (204).

Betty A. Schellenberg's wonderful concluding essay, "Putting Women in Their Place: Women Novelists and London in the 1750s," extends the individual arguments of the volume by examining the professional lives of the four authors

dealt with here plus Frances Brooke and Frances Sheridan, who also operated in the London-centered literary networks of the 1750s. She points out that with the exception of Sheridan, none of these women had children to care for; all of them needed to earn money to live; four of them tried to write for the stage; and all participated in the literary life of London. She then proceeds to trace a fascinating web of interconnections and friendships among them and the various publishers, writers, and patrons in the literary world through letters and dedications, subscription lists, and memoirs and journals. She also notes their class status and the social meaning of their geographical addresses in order to place them in that world. The networking patterns she discloses “reveal an informal, professional, and cordial set of relations dependent on urban proximity, whereby individuals might meet accidentally in a printer’s shop, send one another complimentary copies of new publications, make an introduction to an aristocrat who fancied himself a patron, or mention a translation possibility recently discussed at a bookseller friend’s” (253). This vivid and porous world began to break down in the latter decades of the eighteenth century, as class divisions hardened and separated writers, patrons, and men of literary business. Schellenberg posits that the more open world of the 1750s was, in fact, productive for women and that rigidifying social lines closed down their opportunities to participate in these networks.

Indeed, Schellenberg’s essay summarizes for both books the clamping down on women’s literary reputations and opportunities that happened with the professionalization of literary life and the transformation of the fluid London scene of the 1750s into more exclusive “self-enclosed sub-communities at the end of the century” (254). These books provide much food for thought about individual texts, particular writers, literary history, and the contribution of gender to the eighteenth-century novel.

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**Goethe’s *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* [*Elective Affinities*]: A Scholarly Bicentennial**

Helmut Hühn, ed. *Goethes “Wahlverwandtschaften”: Werk und Forschung* (Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 2010). Pp. ix + 538. €149.95 / \$210.00.

Peter J. Schwartz, *After Jena: Goethe’s “Elective Affinities” and the End of the Old Regime* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 2010). Pp. 358. \$75.00.

Two hundred years after its original publication in October 1809, the novel Goethe called his “best,” *Die Wahlverwandtschaften* [*Elective Affinities*], has lost none of its power to fascinate and mystify its readers and critics, tempting them to add to the long string of commentaries that has made it the most interpreted novel in German literature. It is therefore hardly surprising that the *Wahlverwandtschaften*’s bicentennial has been marked by the publication of important critical studies on both sides of the Atlantic.

*Goethes “Wahlverwandtschaften,”* the Walter de Gruyter volume edited by Helmut Hühn, is the published outcome of a research project conducted at