REVIEW ESSAY

Enlightenment and the Writing Self in Eighteenth-Century Britain

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Karen O'Brien

Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain

CAMBRIDGE: CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2009

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Susan E. Whyman

The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660–1800

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KAREN O'BRIEN'S STUDY of *Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain* and Susan E. Whyman's *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660–1800* are situated at opposite extremes of the historiographical spectrum—the intellectual and ideological in the first case, the material in the second—and both might seem, in some respects, peripheral to actual study of women's writing. Yet by offering thorough examinations of the conditions under which women wrote and the preoccupations that led them to take up their pens, each book has the potential to alter how we understand British women as writers. (While Whyman's study of letter writing among the lower and middling sorts is organized around multigenerational family archives rather than women exclusively, she consistently attends to gender as one of the principal determinants of writing practices.) Both, too, add to our sense of the wide reach of the Enlightenment culture of letters, in particular by adding to our knowledge of how women and non-elites shaped and were shaped by it.

Karen O'Brien offers an impressively broad and detailed analysis of how ideas about the role of women in society and history were articulated and modified throughout the eighteenth century. This study is refreshing, both in recognizing the

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complexity of Enlightenment engagements with "the woman question" and in integrating women's own contributions to the discussion into its overarching narrative. The lessons of this book for me are threefold. First, it shows that we can speak meaningfully of a continuous tradition of women's engagement in theological, philosophical, and historical debates in the period. Second, it demonstrates that we need to take religious belief seriously, by tracing through the century a Latitudinarian theology of rational benevolence that consistently appeals to women through its emphasis on objectively discernable moral truths and the importance of social duties. Third, it suggests that arguments for an essential feminine nature and a distinctively feminine sphere of action, which emerge into prominence at the end of the century, can be understood as a conscious rejection of conjectural history's influential notion "that women can only gain power and some measure of autonomy in a respectfully flirtatious social environment" (215).

O'Brien organizes her material into four roughly chronological movements, extending from 1690 to 1830 and implying a development of thinking about women that begins with theology and shifts first to moral philosophy and conjectural history, then to historicization, and finally to a recognition of the incomplete state of educational and social progress for women. Her first chapter deals with what she calls a "Whig Anglican Enlightenment" that was "favourable to female learning and to female social influence and activity" (27). While O'Brien is not the first to take note of this climate of openness and engagement, her publication-by-publication discussion of the work of Mary Astell, Damaris Masham, Elizabeth Burnet, and Catharine Cockburn in dialogue not only with each other but also with John Locke, Samuel Clarke, the Earl of Shaftesbury, Alexander Pope, and Joseph Butler conveys the fullest sense to date of this intellectual energy as part of an identifiable tradition connecting women writers. Cockburn and Butler, in particular, serve as links to a "Bluestocking theology" articulated by Elizabeth Montagu, Elizabeth Carter, and Catharine Talbot. A tolerant, rationally based Christianity that expresses itself in a self-reflective, practical virtue, this theology is in turn, despite political differences, continuous with the beliefs of the late-century radical writers Catharine Macaulay, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Mary Hays. In effect, O'Brien argues, these women writers formed one "broad English Enlightenment" that "emanated from a common commitment to religious toleration, the cultivation of women's free will and reason, and the social efficacy of benevolence" (67).

To this point, O'Brien's argument demonstrates that Enlightenment views of women and the way women articulated their own history and experience are essentially the same story. This claim becomes more tenuous, however, in the lengthy second chapter on Scottish Enlightenment thought. O'Brien provides a careful and very informative account of the evolution of Scottish moral philosophy, with its emphasis on natural jurisprudence and the moral sense, into the notion that culture, or "manners," has a history, in the form of four universal stages of civilization (hunter-gatherer, pastoral, agricultural, and commercial). Most usefully, she notes the important implications of each stage of this philosophical shift for beliefs about the nature, rights, and social function of women. Particularly influential in this process would appear to be

John Millar's *Observations Concerning the Distinction of Ranks in Society* (1771, republished in 1779 as *The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*), with its emphasis on manners as determining women's "rank" (an ascription based on gender rather than social position); William Robertson's 1777 *History of America*, whose modification of the four-stages theory introduced a morally inflected element of race or ethnicity into this conjectural history's theories of the improved condition of women in modern commercial society; and William Alexander's 1779 *History of Women, from the Earliest Antiquity to the Present Time*, which separated manners from political and legal structures and thereby produced a complacent "history of politeness *to* women, designed to brush up the manners of his male readers, and to reassure his female ones" (104)—a dead end, from a feminist perspective. O'Brien's useful epitomes of these writers are somewhat submerged in her rehearsal of the work of at least sixteen male Scottish writers, giving the chapter the feel of a chronological list. One is left to conclude that many Scottish men had a lot to say about women but that women themselves did not contribute to the debate (with the exception of the unpublished essays of Jemima Kindersley, discussed briefly). In this sense the purpose of this chapter seems slightly at odds with that of the remainder of the book, although the conjunction of the title "Women *and* Enlightenment" admittedly leaves the relation open ended. O'Brien does note the interest of the Bluestocking Montagu in the work of Lord Kames, James Beattie, and the popular writer John Gregory, but the connection is presented as primarily a social one—the kind of analysis she mildly deplores in her first chapter as focused on "practical, socially oriented" links rather than intellectual ones (57). I would have welcomed, in parallel with the argument in chapter 1, a focused examination of Bluestocking correspondence and other writings in response to the Scottish philosophers—even if the upshot of this examination were to suggest that these women eventually withdrew from active engagement with contemporary developments in philosophy and historical theory.

Focusing on both English and Scottish writers in her third chapter, O'Brien points to the emergence of a historicizing, ethnically specific approach to the Celtic, Gothic, and medieval British woman as a response to the universal progressive history proposed by the Scottish philosophers. Here again, women writers' direct engagement with these Enlightenment ideas is not in evidence; rather, writers such as Edward Gibbon, James Macpherson, Richard Hurd, George Lyttelton, and Edmund Burke act as mediators of contemporary Scottish theories of history for midcentury women writers and their successors Catharine Macaulay and Mary Wollstonecraft. In this respect, however, chapter 3 does refocus the book on an integrated male-female tradition, picking up where the first chapter left off. O'Brien traces writers' ambivalence toward the models supplied by Roman matrons, their increasing interest in distinctively British female ancestors, and the growing valorization of chivalry as creating a distinctively European legacy of female social elevation.

This chapter also sets the stage for O'Brien's sensitive and animated discussions, in chapters 4 and 5, of Macaulay's and Wollstonecraft's works "as part of a dialogue with

conjectural, Gothic and medieval accounts of manners" and also "as parts of a Latitudinarian tradition emphasizing benevolence, rational moral autonomy and female education as the means of integrating women into a reformed social order" (152–53). O'Brien is particularly interested in Macaulay's embodiment of "an ideal, a fantasy almost, of meaningful personal responsibility, and a yearning to stand up and be counted which could only have issued from a woman writer never expected to have or do either" (155)—intangible notions that she nevertheless elaborates very convincingly through her discussion of Macaulay's ideas on "the political priority of the individual" (165) and on qualification for citizenship. O'Brien's chapter on Wollstonecraft is similarly illuminating. Building on several recent studies, she analyzes her subject's "remarkable intellectual fertility and eclecticism in deploying the vocabularies of [the Enlightenment debate about women] to radical and feminist ends" (174); this deployment includes a thorough engagement with Macaulay's work. Macaulay and Wollstonecraft both emerge as feminist and pathbreaking, mounting well-informed critiques of complacent Enlightenment political and historical theories to re-imagine civilization's progress as grounded in "morals" rather than "manners." By exposing the limitations of manners-based theories, Wollstonecraft in particular "was able to provide a radical, and disturbing, sociology of gender upon which a less naive theory of rights might be built"—thereby pointing toward "a stage of society beyond the stage of commerce when wealth and political power would be more equally distributed, and when women would cease to be either stuck in the past or fatuously obsessed with the present moment, and live more fully for the future" (200).

From this high point, it is perhaps inevitable that O'Brien's final chapter seems to offer, like *Rasselas*, a "conclusion, in which nothing is concluded." Her aim is to follow two trajectories of the Enlightenment study of women into the nineteenth century: one, the writing of women's history and women's writing of history, and the other, women's response to the challenge of Malthus's theories of population growth and to political economy in general. The two distinct lines of inquiry both involve multiple after-stories, to which are added the divergent influences of Scottish Common Sense philosophy and the new Evangelicalism on understandings of women's social role. While each of these trajectories is of obvious significance to the longer-term fates of writing by and views of women, the antecedents O'Brien feels she needs to establish for nineteenth-century women's writing of history, for example, have the effect of starting multiple new hares—about the influence of Bluestocking historians, the novel, the rise of sympathetic identification as a mode of reading history, and advocacy for female education by the likes of Anna Letitia Barbauld—in addition to the tradition she has been tracing. Nevertheless, her account of the deployment of a newly transhistorical idea of female sensibility in the feminocentric biographies of Mary Berry, Lucy Aikin, and Elizabeth Benger illuminates an intriguing response to the notion of history as a progress through distinct cultural stages. O'Brien's overview of the impact of population theory on ideas about women and history leads to brief discussions of the "Malthusian pessimism" of Jane Austen's novels and of emergent arguments for edu-

cating women in political economy propounded by Jane Marcet, Priscilla Wakefield, Maria Edgeworth, and Harriet Martineau. At the same time, she addresses Evangelicalism in the style of Hannah More, similarly founded on biological definitions of woman, which served to relocate women in the home and in a discourse of reform rather than progress.

I respect O'Brien's refusal to wrap her account up neatly at the cost of cutting off the messy loose ends of history. At the same time, I could not help but feel that her nuanced and learned argument would have been better served by a formal conclusion, however short, reflecting on the relative significance of the many individuals and lines of thought that figure in her narrative. That said, this thoughtful study has left me with a much richer understanding of what is at stake in discussions of "benevolence," "manners," "rank," and "civilization" as notions central to the texts of the Enlightenment and of eighteenth-century women's writing—two fields, in turn, that O'Brien has amply demonstrated must be understood as one and the same.

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Susan Whyman's *The Pen and the People*, by contrast, highlights her research methodology and makes the carefully cumulative structure of her argument explicit. She provides four appendices detailing the family archives, the individual writers, and the manuscript letters upon which her study is based, and explains her decision to focus on a few relatively in-depth case studies rather than create a "kaleidoscope of fragments" (234) drawn from all of the sixty-three family archives she originally analyzed. The book itself builds sequentially from an overview of the material conditions that enabled letter writing, to an examination of worker and middling-sort writers, and finally to a study of the development of "literary" elements in the letters of middling writers. Each segment is structured in terms of a chronological movement through the eighteenth century that traces "the rise of a popular epistolary tradition." This tradition in turn parallels—indeed, enables—the first stages in the emergence of a middle-class culture defined by well-developed literacy and self-consciousness about personal identity and class affiliation.

Whyman presents her study as identifying and demonstrating the emergence of "a new cultural category: 'epistolary literacy'" (9). A more developed level of expertise than the basic literacy of signing one's name, "epistolary literacy" requires at a minimum a rudimentary knowledge of the postal service, of letter-writing conventions, and of basic composition, but can encompass a wide spectrum of competencies, including interpretive reading and the mastery of a range of "literary" skills such as quotation, storytelling, and original composition in a variety of genres. The category thus affords Whyman a framework within which to establish criteria for a qualitative evaluation of levels of literacy among individuals in her case studies. Even prior to her notion of epistolary literacy, a major contribution of Whyman's work is in her discovery of the body of materials from which her case studies are drawn: extensive letter collections

kept by people below the gentry rank, collections that prior to her research were simply assumed to be nonexistent. Assisted by the Access to Archives Database (A2A) of The National Archives, which provides online access to the catalogues of archives scattered throughout England and Wales, she discovered that the north of England in particular was characterized by a breadth of literacy that grew in parallel with the area's accelerating industrial development. The extent of literacy in the region implies the widespread availability of informal education outside the registered schools that provided material evidence for prior research.

Whyman's first chapter, "Creating the Letter," provides an overview of the physical process of letter writing in the eighteenth century, the means by which children learned to write, and the instruction offered by copybooks and letter-writing manuals. While she downplays the influence of such manuals, emphasized in other recent work in the field, Whyman nevertheless underscores the importance of modeling: the children of both elite and merchant families were taught to write letters in imitation of their elders, of writing masters, and of literary figures. Parents in both social groups emphasized epistolary literacy as an essential social and business skill, increasingly important for sons and daughters alike. In the course of the century, the merchant class took the lead in developing a clear round hand and an informal style that became emblematic of English culture. This development was accompanied, as Whyman outlines in her second chapter, by innovation and expansion in the postal system through the long eighteenth century, resulting in an increasingly efficient network linking all corners of England. Once again, epistolary literacy entailed knowing how to use (or abuse) the Royal Mail, and Whyman shows through her subjects' commentary how, "By 1800, a service created to censor mail had become a private necessity and a public right" extending across the nation and serving all strata of society (71).

Always engaging, *The Pen and the People* truly springs to life when Whyman presents her principal case studies—five consisting of farming and working families of the rural North (chapter 3), followed by three drawn from middling-sort families (chapter 4). The archive of the Soresbie family of farmers, for example, extending from the 1670s to the 1840s, is used to demonstrate that children were taught to write through copying and through the intermittent paid services of local instructors, that original composition emerged out of recombining copied phrases in personal copybooks, that individuals used letters to maintain their relations with distant family members and represent themselves to their social superiors through letters, and above all, that letter writing was prized by a family attempting to maintain and improve its status in a changing rural environment. Examining why, how, and to what effect such families used letters, then, Whyman finds a wide range of practical, social, and literary motivations, which support an understanding of literacy as both self-conscious and as heightening consciousness. This latter effect of letter writing is most fully explored in the chapter of middling-sort case studies, which presents a trio of Anglican, Quaker, and Congregationalist merchant families. Whyman uses extensive quotations from their letters to reveal the anxieties caused by their precarious social status and political

disenfranchisement, as well as individuals' negotiations of identity under the competing pressures of religious belief, business demands, and gender roles.

In the third and final portion of her study, "From Letters to Literature," Whyman leaves behind the north of England to focus on two generations of an upper-middling-sort family based in Buckinghamshire and then Bath: Jane Johnson, wife of Woolsey Johnson, a Church of England clergyman, and two of her children—Barbara, who remained unmarried and lived contentedly on a slender income from family legacies, and Robert, an army officer who married a wealthy widow, lived as a gentleman, and dabbled in science. Whyman shows throughout the book that letter writers' references to reading materials are surprisingly common, even among those with no discernible formal education, but the project of these two chapters is more ambitious. Here she interweaves her analysis of the Johnsons' correspondence with an account of the dominant literary culture of the day in order to show how highly developed epistolary literacy led to participation in that culture. Jane Johnson embeds in her letters educational materials specially designed for her children, dream visions, nature descriptions, and even a short story entitled "The History of Miss Clarissa of Buckinghamshire." Johnson's use of such devices to analyze social problems of her day, Whyman argues plausibly, is a response to her favorite literary texts, which she quotes in her commonplace book. She focuses especially on the fictional models of Samuel Richardson, whose virtuous female characters use letters to work through moral and ethical dilemmas as well as to express themselves in highly individualized and literary styles. In her chapter on Jane Johnson's children, Whyman traces a shift in their literary nature away from religious and moral reflection toward witty satire, the rhetoric of feeling, and critical commentary on recent publications. These changes, she argues, reflect the influences of sensibility, Scottish Enlightenment thought, and the review periodicals in the larger culture. (Into this chapter Whyman also introduces the children's friend, Anna Riggs Miller, patron of famous poetry-vase contests at her Batheaston villa. Miller serves as an example of a middling-sort individual who first rises to prominence through public deployment of the fashionable literary activity of epistolary travel writing.)

Whyman initially presents the rise of epistolary literacy as paralleling Ian Watt's rise of the novel: it depends on similar conditions—an interest in the quotidian lives of private people, a habit of self-examination, and the emergence of secular individualism. But ultimately, she suggests more provocatively that it was through repeated acts of epistolarity, requiring introspection and the expression of an identity both singly and through dialogue with a correspondent, that the characteristically middle-class habits of independent thought as well as conformity to such values as industry, honesty, reputation, and (for women) propriety were created. Moreover, the epistolary practices of people of the middling sort "influenced" (Whyman's frequent term) the epistolary novel as developed by Samuel Richardson, as well as "the travel account, the critical review, and the sentimental novel" (215) in the latter half of the century. While Whyman's discussions often imply a feedback loop—reading *Clarissa*, for example, inspired Jane

Johnson to imitate her and to tell stories like hers, but Richardson himself was inspired to write by the feminine epistolary circles he became part of—causality at times remains vague. Did Richardson in fact participate in the sorts of epistolary exchange he represents in *Clarissa* before writing the novel? If not, what does it mean to say that Jane Johnson influenced his work? Indeed, at points Whyman's claims appear highly provocative, suggesting that a number of the characteristic literary movements of the period were in fact the creations of relatively obscure, middling-sort readers struggling to work out the relation between their religious beliefs and their daily lives or developing a taste for the expression of feeling. Broadly speaking, I am sympathetic to the argument that a deeply embedded epistolary ethos might have shaped the literary movements of the day, but at the individual level it seems more likely that the majority of the writers presented here were imitating their reading material rather than influencing it.

In short, a more fully theorized approach to notions of identity and self-fashioning through epistolarity, and to the relationship between culture and the individual agent, might have been useful in this book. At times Whyman makes assertions that can only be speculative—for example, "Hitherto, [John Fawdington, Yorkshire bridle-maker] had had vague amorphous feelings. Letters gave him a space for the concrete expression of falling in love" (94). Even the definition of literacy that apparently "has underpinned this book"—Robert Pattison's view of literacy as "a cultural process that demanded 'consciousness of the uses of language and the mastery of skills to express them'" (110)—is not introduced until the end of the third chapter. Nevertheless, the argument that the act of elaborating ideas in letters took individuals "to a more complex level of literacy than spontaneous speech" (101) is intuitively convincing and certainly implied by the evidence Whyman presents so generously and analyzes so sensitively. The striking case studies of *The Pen and the People*, as well as the substantial archival body out of which they emerge, will certainly require a revision of the history of eighteenth-century literacy. In addition, for scholars of the period's popular and literary print cultures, new and important questions have been raised about the role of the pen and the many humble people who wielded it in disseminating and shaping those cultures.

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