

2017

Review of Teresa Barnard, ed. *British Women and the Intellectual World in the Long Eighteenth Century*.

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Recommended Citation

Dorn, Judith (2017) "Review of Teresa Barnard, ed. *British Women and the Intellectual World in the Long Eighteenth Century*," *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830*: Vol.7: Iss.1, Article 3.
<http://doi.org/10.5038/2157-7129.7.1.1155>
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol7/iss1/3>

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Abstract

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Keywords

review, intellectual, eighteenth century, context, women writers, influence

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Review of Teresa Barnard, ed. *British Women and the Intellectual World in the Long Eighteenth Century*. Ashgate, 2015. Xix + 194pp. Index. ISBN 978-1- 4724-3745-7, by Judith Dorn.

Framed as an exploration of rights “felt, not defined,” in Anna Barbauld’s phrasing, this collection of essays achieves its aim of representing conscious strategies by means of which British women expanded their reach beyond the scope customarily allowed them for taking action and expressing themselves in writing. The title’s reference to an “intellectual world” reflects the aura of prestige attaching to academic and professional fields in which women’s participation would have been considered surprising and largely unwelcome. Each essay, however, maintains a high standard of specificity in describing particular scientific, political, philosophical, or theological contexts.

The list of remarkable women represented in this volume—Lady Mary Wortley Montagu; Anna Seward; Mary Wollstonecraft; Hannah More; Elizabeth Inchbald; Anna Barbauld; Helen Maria Williams; Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck; Elizabeth Percy, First Duchess of Northumberland; Joanna Baillie; and Harriet and Sophia Lee—indicates its main contribution: to present evidence that the achievements of these women occurred in networks of connectedness belonging within, and influencing, domains of ideas.

Consisting of three sections of three essays each, “An Engagement with Science,” “Religious Discourses,” “Radical Women, Politics, and Philosophy,” this volume demonstrates avenues for research by moving purposefully across genres of writing that might otherwise be treated separately by distinct disciplines.

The first essay, by Daniel J.R. Grey, exemplifies this collection’s methods of rounding out a context by gathering evidence that might otherwise be given separate treatment by literary biographers or medical historians. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu’s personal role in promoting smallpox inoculation within England gains dimensions of meaning as Grey situates her efforts in relation to a history of smallpox inoculation reaching through Turkey to China and laden with not only English suspicion of foreign, Islamic influence but also social and professional class and gender hierarchies. Instead of taking an internalist perspective on developments within medical disciplines, Grey directs attention to Montagu’s adaptability to reversals in cultural reception of her efforts to save lives. Montagu’s poetry and other evidence of her feelings and motivations fill in the picture of her work of establishing the credibility of inoculation as a specific procedure in the eyes of the medical profession. Her experiences with negotiating issues of professional credibility bore some parallels to the jeopardy in which Judith Drake found her own reputation as a medical practitioner who served women. Ultimately, Montagu found her person-to-person influence, rather than

publications, the most effective method for moving a widening social network to accept and practice inoculation.

Greater emphasis on literary performance appears in the second essay, Teresa Barnard's exposition of the network of affiliation surrounding the imagining of volcanoes in popular published poems by Eleanor Anne Porden Franklin and Anna Seward. Barnard's expansive interweaving of activities and ideas in early nineteenth-century sciences and the arts supports her portrayal of popular poetic works as vehicles actively participating in English culture's imaginative reach. Where a Sir William Hamilton, or the painters Turner and Wright of Derby, applied an Enlightenment spirit of investigation to volcanoes, Franklin and Seward also ignited and shaped the public's imagination of the natural world and its process of discovery through the arts. Barnard's researches detail the poets' access to institutions of scientific debate and venues for self-education. Eleanor Porden had herself married the Arctic explorer Franklin, and Barnard explores the significance of her connection to Erasmus Darwin, who acknowledged her achievements. Both Darwin and Franklin underwent criticism in print for the inappropriateness of giving epic poetic treatment to scientific matters. Arguments pressing society to include science in women's education had involved Wollstonecraft, Barbauld, Baillie, and Edgeworth during this era as well. Anna Seward's poetic treatment of Brydone's travels to Sicily and Mount Etna serves Barnard as a parallel case. In the context of that debate, and unable to travel freely, both women poets nevertheless assimilated natural discoveries and provided content and imagery for the reading public's scientific imagination.

The subject of Malini Roy's essay on Mary Wollstonecraft's contribution to paediatrics literally involves imaginative projection. It takes some dexterity on Roy's part to reconstruct the significance of Wollstonecraft's planned *Letters on the Management of Infants*, a series left incomplete by her death famously from complications in giving birth to the author of *Frankenstein*. William Godwin had included incipient material towards the *Letters* in his publication of Wollstonecraft's posthumous works. Providing a brief overview of the contents of these remaining documents would have enabled readers to locate each element of Roy's discussion more clearly in some type of sequence. In keeping with this collection's hallmark approach, Roy's work amasses connections and potential lines of resistance and influence between its woman subject's, Wollstonecraft's, ideas and major contemporary authorities in the field. Roy recaptures the significance of current debates over paediatrics by setting Locke and Rousseau's influential theories of childhood alongside the hard data on child mortality rates that pressed upon awareness at the time. Strong likelihood of Wollstonecraft's influence on paediatric practice appears from her having mentored Lady Mountcashell, whose publications and practice in the field had carried Wollstonecraft's objectives forward. Roy intersperses her accounts of the era's

efforts to shape the “child of nature” with glances forward to the contentions over paediatric science among the inheritors of these debates in the present.

The most explicitly theorized essays in the collection appear in the set on religious discourses, including in particular “Anxiety, Authorship, Authority: The Maternal Feminine and the Divine in Hannah More’s *Sacred Dramas*.” Susan Chaplin starts from the established evaluation of Hannah More as a paradoxical, self-contradictorily anti-feminist writer and contributes a thorough analysis of the *Sacred Dramas* to More scholarship. In reviewing the dramas, Chaplin complicates the standard account of More as pillar of patriarchy while vividly conveying the creative forcefulness that comes across from reading More’s work. The connection drawn between More and Hegel would have been more illuminating with more explanation of how they could be treated as sharing the same post-revolutionary cultural context and imagery. Nevertheless, Chaplin’s readings for the inflections of gender and the eventual association of the maternal feminine with the divine in these dramas marshal extensive evidence.

Of the other two essays in the section representing “Religious Discourses,” Kaley Kramer’s develops a deep cultural and historical reading of a single novel, Elizabeth Inchbald’s *A Simple Story*, and Natasha Duquette’s elucidates complex networks of relationship connecting dissenting women, including Anna Barbauld, Helen Maria Williams, Joanna Baillie, and Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck, whose poetic practices involved direct lines of connection with William Wordsworth, Robert Lowth, and Hannah More as well.

Kramer’s finely tuned analysis lends contextual nuance to a literary practice such as the Gothic by interpreting *A Simple Story* not just according to the traditional Protestant suspicion of threatening Catholic imagery but through further attention to meanings attaching to intimate gestures such as kneeling and surrender. The novel’s position in relation to events leading up to Catholic Emancipation in 1829, as well as to Inchbald’s eventual personal turn to Catholicism, gains texture from Kramer’s articulation of the narrative’s subtle deployments of Catholic doctrines, theatricality, and the emotional codes of “sensibility.” Heightened anxiety surrounding acts of meaning themselves came from longstanding association of Catholic conscience with latitude to “equivocate.” Kramer argues that the novel cultivates an attitude receptive to religious difference during a period of tension between English protestants and Catholics.

Natasha Duquette’s title “Veiled Exegesis” captures her argument regarding the dissenting women writers’ persuasive strategies. Taking Anna Barbauld, Helen Maria Williams, Joanna Baillie, and Mary Anne Schimmelpenninck case by case, Duquette demonstrates their covert assertiveness as they negotiated institutional exclusion and familial disapproval to imply critiques of current theology and religious style through performances that carried out Biblical interpretation and modeled religious practice in poetry, aesthetic theory, and devotion. She finds

evidence at times of their mutual support, as well as of the symbolic support of precedents provided by the figures of women prophets and judges from the Bible. Duquette's deftly drawn connections among a host of actors demonstrates these women writers' participation in a world of ideas that included the Bluestockings, Edmund Burke's philosophy, and the anti-slavery movement.

The final section conveys the force of social and print culture context by representing the voices and opinions ridiculing, criticizing, and otherwise opposing three women who engaged public domains with their ideas and influence. Laura Mayer's account of Elizabeth Percy, 1st Duchess of Northumberland, registers the outspoken social resistance to her enjoying the liberty that came with the wealth she brought into her love-match with the Duke. Contentious enough on her own account, Percy moved in political circles and personally turned the tide to affect the Westminster election of 1767. Her diaries demonstrate that her Gothic redesign of Alnwick Castle and its grounds, though ridiculed by Horace Walpole, reflected a taste informed by her travels abroad and exposure to the picturesque. Her aesthetic motivations also drive her published travel writing and complement her passion to revive her Percy heritage.

The case of Joanna Baillie, whose *Plays on the Passions* were transformed from being works of "superior genius" to flawed as soon as their authorship changed from Anonymous to woman writer, throws the era's gendering of intellect into sharp outline. Louise Duckling situates the arguments and ideas of Baillie's "Introductory Discourse" in relation to David Hume, Rousseau, and Adam Smith and demonstrates the leading edge Baillie supplied to ideas later articulated by William Wordsworth. Baillie's plays, each personifying the passions, ought to be brought to the attention of the scholars who have recently renovated conceptions of the passions within fields of early modern philosophy.

Imke Heuer's essay on Harriet and Sophia Lee's collaborative collection *The Canterbury Tales* brings this collection to a fitting conclusion. The "mixture of dismissal and praise" (169) accorded the sisters' achievements is set in the context of Byron's rewriting of Harriet Lee's "The German's Tale" without her permission. Working to restore recognition to Harriet alongside her better-known sister Sophia, Heuer represents the international as well as British reception of their work and their interconnectedness with a range of writers, including Thomas Percy and Charlotte Smith. The essay emphasizes Harriet Lee's engagement with contemporary debates over the French Revolution as her stories subvert touchstones of Gothic romanticism, especially the mystique it associates with exceptional individuals and the nobility, through stories acknowledging the suffering that accompanies social and political change.

Scholarship regarding nineteenth-century women and science has outpaced treatment of their early modern predecessors, as the introductory essay by Teresa Barnard and Ruth Watts points out. The scope of *British Women and the*

Intellectual World in the Long Eighteenth Century successfully delineates a history of commonalities experienced by women as actors through the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These essays contribute to the longstanding project of recovering the history of women by recognizing the lines of connectedness that mark “a tradition of their own,” as Elaine Showalter once denominated it. In the case of these essays, the answers to the question of whether women exerted influence and created legacies are clearly and sometimes delicately or suggestively drawn. Some of the commonality in the roles taken by women comes from the shaping influence of material conditions and of mentalities resistant to their freedom of motion. As the editors’ introduction emphasizes, these women took action through strategies for outmaneuvering the constraints on their education and ability to travel. At issue, as always, is the question of what counts as significance. Is significance weighed materially, through scope of consequences produced or the spreading echoes of influence? Is significance achieved through acts of energetic assertiveness or the value of the person-in-herself? The degree of public engagement and influence on the part of the women represented in this collection clearly varies. Nevertheless, these lines of inquiry demonstrate methods through which women’s historical agency can be known and understood, widening perception of what counts as intellectual inquiry.

Originally published as part of the Ashgate—now Routledge—series “British Literature in Context in the Long Eighteenth Century,” this volume’s constellation of case studies avoids treating the controversial term “historical context” as an abstraction. Instead, these highly readable and engaging essays represent materially precise personal relationships, rhetorical actions, and domains of ideas exchanged within institutions. Clearly aware of the social analysis of professions developed by Schiebinger, Shapin, Jordanova, and others, the collection sets biography in the midst of consequential material and social connections. Barnard and Watts’s introduction further situates this collection in relation to a brief but useful survey of recent works representing early modern women’s contact with intellectual and primarily scientific endeavors. Without directly discussing intellectual, social, or cultural history as methodologies, each essay builds its context of relationships among actors by recognizing primary source materials as living action. The essays treat the imaginations of women as the very historical agency to whose significance the documentary evidence testifies. *British Women and the Intellectual World* searches out evidence of these women’s personal and institutional affiliations with and both personal and textual influence on prominent men of ideas and writers and so consolidates that significance. Suggestively demonstrating that concepts are not limited to print culture and public or published achievements, these researchers find resonances of meaning and agency in these women’s acts of mental reach across Britain and Europe.