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“Before I am Quite Forgot”: Women’s Critical Literary Biography and the Future

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“Before I am Quite Forgotten”: Women’s Critical Literary Biography and the Future

Abstract

“Before I am Quite Forgotten’: Women’s Critical Literary Biography and the Future” extends the conversation about literary “worth” in the twenty-first century as it *still* judges and ignores women authors of the past. Specifically, this essay explores the role of women’s literary historical biography as a primary marker of worth and as a means of shaping legacy. I also discuss my (perhaps more non-traditional) experience—both my personal circumstances and particular material conditions—writing the critical biography *Charlotte Lennox: An Independent Mind*. Without a substantial biography that shows the scope of Lennox’s mind, her significant corpus, and her interventions in literary history and current events through publishing, this talented and popular author would not have had the opportunity to be fully taken seriously. This essay is designed to encourage potential biographers who study remarkable women authors of past centuries around the world. It also asserts the value of the #MeToo movement and social media for more robust legacy making.

Keywords

Biography, Women, Charlotte Lennox, Publishing, #MeToo, Social Media, Frances Burney, William Strahan, Samuel Johnson, Siri Hustvedt, Miriam Small, Elaine Showalter, Devoney Looser, Audre Lorde, Betty Friedan, O M Brack, Margaret Dalziel, Margaret Doody, Lana L. Dalley, Kellie Holzer, Josefa Amar y Borbón, Meta Forkel-Liebeskind, Queen Məntəwwab, Sir Joshua Reynolds, John Smart, Karenza Sutton-Bennett, Kelly Plante

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In 1776 Charlotte Lennox was aggressively campaigning for herself, as she had been for thirty years now, in what was becoming the great metropolis of London. She hoped to rely on her extensive network of friends and colleagues to help her bring to print her own lasting literary legacy, the publication in three quarto volumes on fine paper of a *New and Elegant Edition, Enlarged and Corrected, of The Original Works of Mrs. Charlotte Lennox*. Many of Lennox's then seventeen publications—poems, plays, novels, parts of her magazine, and Shakespeare criticism—had been translated or reprinted in eleven countries, from Sweden and Russia to Spain and America. Her own translations from French and Italian were praised for her linguistic and poetic skill, and Frances Burney would soon declare her “the best of any living author” (105). These beautifully designed tomes would include many of Lennox's famous titles, as well as new writing. *Original Works*, in all of its planned majesty, was to be a physical manifestation of Lennox's substantial contribution to literary history.

This moment in Lennox's career could lay the groundwork for a literary legacy that would not only commemorate but also preserve her remarkably fluid, flexible, and mellifluous literary talent. Her successful play, *Old City Manners*, had recently enjoyed an impressive run over two seasons at Drury Lane, and her image was featured in Samuel Richard's 1779 painting *The Nine Living Muses of Great Britain*, which would soon be displayed on the august walls of the Royal Academy. But perhaps most important to Lennox's financial security was the recent legal decision regarding an author's right to her own literary property, which had been made just in time to make *Original Works* possible.¹

Lennox had enlisted the support of the premiere portrait artist Sir Joshua Reynolds so that she could include his rendering of her as the frontispiece and perhaps the backing of Queen Charlotte, to whom the book would be dedicated. The highly sought-after printer, her longtime friend William Strahan, was nearly secured. She wrote to Samuel Johnson, who had agreed to write the proposal, “it is of great consequence to me to have [this elegant collection] presented to Her Majesty, before I am quite forgot, the sooner you begin to treat with Mr. Strahan the better” (Schürer 167). For Lennox, earning money by her pen was materially important, but having a literary legacy was far more valuable. From the ages of eighteen to sixty-one, Lennox published in all of the most popular and influential genres and for decades was considered by many to be “eminent for genius, learning and public spirit” (Chalmers n.p.). At this time, she had also earned a good income. Now she was determined to be appreciated as a gifted author long after her death.

However, instead of enjoying the thrill of seeing her *Original Works* in bookstalls and ushered off to circulating libraries, Lennox was effectively lost to literary history for nearly a century and then considered a “minor” author until only recently. The limits imposed on the highest echelons of “genius” by critics and the marketplace have long been debated, but much of Lennox’s erasure has to do with how “genius” has been defined. While “The Great Forgetting” is often invoked, “The Great Suppression” might be a more apt description.²

This essay will grapple with literary worth in the twenty-first century as readers and scholars judge and ignore women authors of the past. It will specifically explore the role of women’s literary historical biography as a primary marker of that worth. I will also discuss my experience writing the critical biography *Charlotte Lennox: An Independent Mind* (2018). Without a substantial biography that shows the scope of Lennox’s mind, her significant oeuvre, and her interventions in literary history and current events, she would never have the chance to be fully taken seriously. Part of my objective here is to continue to challenge the limits placed on literary value and to address what contemporary novelist Siri Hustvedt describes, “Much of the prejudice against women is unconscious, not conscious. But that only makes it more corrosive. Because people, both men and women, are not aware of their own biases” (Freiheit). Thus, another goal of this essay is to call for more biographies about women authors of past centuries around the world.

Today, we express increased interest in women’s intellect and ambition. For example, Jane Austen fandom is at an all-time high in large part because of the film industry. However, this snowballing could not have been predicted even twenty years ago. Yet for serious study that still has an influence on popular value systems, it will likely always be true that a critical biography will represent intellectual heft, such as biographies of Martin Luther King, Jr by Taylor Branch, Alexander Hamilton by Ron Chernow, and Lyndon Johnson by Robert Caro. Millions of women have expressed their own genius by laboring and succeeding in their chosen fields. However, for women’s intellect to be seen as equal to men’s, we must work towards more robust legacy making.

Forty-six years ago, Elaine Showalter, in *A Literature of Their Own*, expertly “opened the door...backward” in her tracing of women’s literary history much further back than the early nineteenth century (Looser, “Why” 221). Scholars such as Showalter jumpstarted a field of research in eighteenth-century women writers,³ and many specialists before her had laid the groundwork. I was inspired by Miriam Small: In 1930s New Haven, Connecticut, Small painstakingly sifted through print catalogs and searched in eighteenth-century newspapers and reviews

for any evidence of Charlotte Lennox (1729/30-1804). Her careful work eventually led to a sixty-page revised dissertation that considered Lennox's publications, reviews of her works, and anecdotes from well-known, mostly male, authors whose lives were more fully documented. Published one hundred and thirty-one years after Lennox's death, Small's work became the first book-length study of Lennox.

I imagine Small's contribution to be based on a different kind of grueling archival work than that which we undertake today. Hers was a handwritten affair, possibly with three by five notecards where individual facts (and shorthand citation) were shuffled into a form that would become a carefully researched narrative. Small's biography is rich with the results of skillful literary sleuthing to recover what had been mostly lost to history. Yet nearly a quarter of a century after Showalter, Devoney Looser in 2009 lamented in "Why I Am Still Writing Women's Literary History" that "the fast and furious changes in feminist theorizing that characterized the 1970-1990s seem, for the moment, to have slowed to a trickle" (Looser, "Why" 225). Looser argued that there is still work to be done in the writing of women's literary history. Certainly, women's critical biography, which carefully details a biographer's evidence, has an important role to play in turning up the spigot.

Material conditions, limiting myths, and the biographer

As a reader, I am most drawn to authors whose early lives do not provide the obvious supports to be successful. I am curious how a person finds the internal will and courage not only to write but seek public attention and a larger audience. Or are some people unusually wired to ignore the expectations (and sometimes slings and arrows) of those closest to her and follow her heart? Lennox arrived in England alone at fifteen, and faced an uncertain future best survived by catering to the desires of the extraordinarily privileged who generously took her in—which does not seem the recipe for successful authorship in eighteenth-century London. However, Lennox went on to publish novels, essays, literary criticism, poems, plays, and translations, and illustrated through fiction and non-fiction her belief that women could learn, write, and have a public voice at a time when they were discouraged at best, and lambasted at worst, for considering a public life. Lennox was tough enough to disregard social expectations and to navigate a male-dominated publishing industry; she brought to light British interactions with the American colonies in her fiction and engaged her readers with figures, information, and ideas from around the world. Lennox is a compelling example of a young, writing woman formed in a colonial environment with limited family support for her creative urges. Thus, her unusual path to literary success drew me

in, as I sought to understand what she repeatedly communicated through her works and who supported and encouraged her.

My questions about how she asserted women's intellectual value, grew into a public figure, and appeared impervious to criticism were useful to my own personal development, both as a woman and as a writer. I am not the first to wonder how much a biographer grows from the ways in which her subject confronted injustice. And yet it is worth admitting that working on Lennox changed me. When I learned of moments when she spoke up for herself and was accused of being difficult, in one case as another woman writer asserted that "nobody liked her," I initially papered over this element of contrariness. However, I grew to embrace Lennox's anger and through her to understand Audre Lorde's injunction, "that we not hide behind the mockeries of separations that have been imposed upon us and which so often we accept as our own" (16). Lorde, thus, urges us not only to identify how people are seen as less important, but how to resist these hierarchies.

Although I am an able-bodied, cis, white child of a loving, working-class family from a different time and place, I had to leave those comforts to see the false hierarchies on which Lorde shines a bright light. My hometown of Peoria, Illinois, is also the childhood home of the journalist and activist Betty Friedan, whom I learned about long after leaving. I was especially surprised to discover that one year after my birth in 1967, Friedan co-founded the National Organization for Women. My first-generation undergraduate experience occurred at an evangelical college in rural Indiana. Until graduate school, I did not know what it meant to be a "canonical" author or a feminist. Perhaps in some ways I was a late-twentieth-century Arabella, Lennox's simultaneously bookish and naïve protagonist in *The Female Quixote*.

My discovery and immediate fascination with Lennox began soon after a three-year stint living and teaching in Madrid. Even then I was skeptical about the grand narrative of England's one-directional influence on the rest of the world. This initial suspicion drove me to find more answers about who Lennox was, since at that time even her most popular novel *The Female Quixote* was not assigned in university classes. Before Spain, my own experiences were relatively limited, and at that small college in the 1980s I was exposed to a narrow way of understanding the world that assumed the superiority of Christianity and the United States. La Mancha revealed to me systems of knowledge that are structured by the privileged. Recognizing the power of social construction also shook my previously satisfied worldview. Therefore, Lennox's presentation of a

young woman who could agitate and disrupt the socially contented by adapting Cervantes' internationally popular story to highlight the very trap of patriarchy intrigued me.

For several years, becoming Lennox's next biographer was my secret. I did not tell anyone because it felt like an outlandish dream. A critical biography is a monumental commitment, and even to the most seasoned researcher and writer it is the mother of all projects. Frequently, I felt that this was a Sisyphean task. It seems entirely understandable that many potential biographers do not finish, or at best, not until retirement. Aren't biographers supposed to leave no stone unturned? Whether or not that is true, I had several limitations like these in my mind—stories I told myself about who a biographer was and what she (but honestly mostly he) was supposed to do.

I imagined that biographers had far more time than I had. I convinced myself that they had far more material than I did. And certainly, they knew how to organize a ridiculous amount of information better than I did. They had unlimited resources to get to libraries all around the world, and they had far more historical knowledge than I did. Furthermore, the dearth of archival material has been one of the more vexing aspects of trying to recover women writers. Like many of these women, Lennox did not leave boxes and boxes of correspondence, diaries and all the other ephemera of a biographer's dream. Many women writers have not been seriously considered as good biographical subjects, simply for not having much extant material to illuminate their lives. At some point, every one of these censoring thoughts stopped me from continuing.

Taking on this monumental task felt unwise for many practical reasons as well, not least because I was a graduate student and a high school teacher with little extra time or hope of teaching at a university. I lacked confidence not only as a researcher but as a writer. However, in the late 1990s I was fortunate to have the support of O. M. "Skip" Brack at Arizona State University, who thought Lennox was a worthy subject. As I proposed unwieldy literary historical dissertation ideas, he tried another tack: "What do you *really* want to write about?" Without thinking, I immediately shot back, "Lennox's life." I was sure that a biography would not be considered worthy literature doctoral material, nor in the strictest terms, theoretical enough. However, to my surprise, Skip responded enthusiastically, "Then, do that! If her whole life is too much for a dissertation, write about a discrete time period." I was immediately energized.

Skip's enthusiasm was essential to my commitment to a Lennox biography, but Dr. Small's *Charlotte Ramsay Lennox* was the crucial impetus. She had unearthed

rich material and compiled an essential tool for researchers, and she was supported in this research and writing by Yale University. Even as I chafed at the academic hierarchy that Yale represented, its imprimatur on her labor nonetheless reinforced the fact that my efforts might have at least a tiny chance of not being ignored. In my copy of Small's book, I highlighted her text in neon rainbow, each color representing a topic that intrigued me. This intellectual sorting represented in brilliant hues my first tentative attempts at shaping my own thinking about Lennox.

In the 1920s and early 1930s, Small published a modest book about a virtually unknown author. But at the turn of the twenty-first century, I was able to question such terms as "minor" (which Small used) and "canonical," in ways that are similar to Lennox's *The Female Quixote* protagonist Arabella's distrust of her society's beliefs about acceptable books for young women and male "guidance." The 1989 Oxford World's Classics publication of her most popular novel *The Female Quixote* (1752), edited by Margaret Dalziel and with an introduction by Margaret Anne Doody, was crucial in kickstarting the Lennox recovery effort that I would now attempt to carry forward. I had found more anecdotes from Lennox's contemporaries and periodicals published during her lifetime—including a frequently reprinted Lennox biography, a glowing obituary, and countless more reviews of her eighteen works than Small was able to find at her point in history. But one cache of information was especially important. Forty-eight letters to and from Lennox, poems by and about Lennox, and a receipt were all preserved by an anonymous donor in a safe deposit box in Dunfermline, had been discovered in 1964, and these provided the most biographical detail. That presumably wealthy donor will always intrigue me for her (or his) foresight and commitment to Lennox's legacy. While these letters were primarily professional, rather than personal, I consoled myself that this material offered far more biographical evidence than Shakespeare biographers have enjoyed.

While women's creative work had been receiving more attention in the late 1990s, the work of collecting Lennox's texts, most of which were not in modern editions, was done by using *Eighteenth-Century Collections*, a microfilm collection that required using frequently malfunctioning machines and paying for printouts for study.⁴ As is often the case, all of Lennox's editions are not housed in one library, so seeing them meant travelling. I received some travel money as a graduate student, and later a few small grants and compensation for mentoring work with undergraduates. I also funded these shoestring trips with my high school and later university salary. I was able to study Lennox editions in Aberystwyth, Wales, Vancouver, British Columbia, and London, Ontario, as well as in cities throughout the US and England, and translations of her texts in Berlin

and Madrid. However, the British Library was the best place to study the majority of her works. Therefore, I enjoyed many summer weeks adding details to my files, inhaling the pleasant aroma of recycled linen and cotton rag paper, and travelling by Tube for over an hour each way from spartan quarters. It was glorious.

I would later learn that Skip was among a minority of literary scholars who willingly supported a biographical project for a doctorate in literature. In fact, writing solely about women writers was frowned upon by many others in our field at the time.⁵ But Skip's passion for book history likely played a role in his support. Thus, while I would be part of a growing project to recover eighteenth-century women writers, focusing on one of them would neither offer me a high profile, nor perhaps even a respected, career. In fact, Susan Fraiman notes that until 2010 it was considered "retrograde" "to claim 'women' as the rubric under which we do our work" (238).

But there were other practical elements that were perhaps more threatening to this project, and frankly they were the more central concerns on my mind. I was a thirty-three-year-old, single, child-free high school teacher when I began this project. Would my future allow me to complete such a monumental task? As luck would have it—and as I was finishing my dissertation written in the wee hours of the morning, after lesson planning and grading in the evenings and on weekends—I was offered a tenure-track position in the English Education program in the English Department at California State University, Long Beach.⁶ At my university, where we have a four/four teaching load and do not have graduate assistants, tenure and promotion do not require monographs. We are promoted by publishing peer-reviewed essays approximately every other year. To have any hope of completing the Lennox biography, I presented conference papers to get frequent feedback and published a few essays to give myself deadlines. No one complained, to my face at least, that every paper I gave focused in some way on Lennox's wide-ranging work and/or her milieu. Editing *Masters of the Marketplace: British Women Novelists of the 1750s* and Lennox's 1758 novel *Henrietta*, with Ruth Perry for the now-defunct [Eighteenth-Century Novels by Women](#) series with University Press of Kentucky, were also excellent preparation for the biography, and thankfully both counted toward my promotion and tenure.

While I vacillated between anxieties that I did not have enough material or that I was not looking in all the right places to find more, year after year I slowly amassed a substantial corpus of information about Lennox's life and a strong grasp of all of her works. I also learned something that might be unorthodox,

scandalous, or even sacrilegious to admit. Biographies are neither exhaustive nor even comprehensive, in the sense that they include all extant information about a subject. There is always one more archive that could be checked and one more Google search that could be done. This realization, along with the fact that it was satisfying work, helped me continue researching and writing. I also pressed on because my university was supportive of peer-reviewed publications without the strictures some other universities impose.

The conditions of my personal and working life, like the conditions of Lennox's and women writers throughout time, played a significant role in my production. So did massive shifts in technology and possibilities of travel. Now, to an exponentially greater degree, a biographer has greater access to her subject. With the rise of the material available online and the impossibility of visiting every library that might have Lennox material, I had to accept that I would have to do strategic searching and travelling to make the best use of my time. And finally, I had to play a psychological game with myself. If this book never saw the light of day, was it worth my time? For more than a decade I told myself that it was. Still, there were moments when I nearly gave up and others—perhaps more like years—when I thought of this part of my life as more my hobby than my job. Often, I wondered who my audience would be, but more often I wondered how many readers would make this sustained effort worth it to me. But I was spurred on by the rewards of conference papers and essay publications.

During those many years when I did not know if this book would be published, I was still drawn to working on it. I kept telling myself that today, yes, even today, I was going to elbow out at least one of those ridiculous number of life and work responsibilities and sit down for an hour, because I loved this time with the pathbreaking and flinty woman who—while nearly constantly down on her luck—figured out how to publish and became a literary celebrity. Publishing the entire story of Lennox's life through the lens of her publications and in the form of a critical biography remained my goal. When I finally realized that these one million puzzle pieces could be satisfactorily arranged in many ways, something unlocked and I felt freer to tell Lennox's story.

Over several years I sent a number of unsuccessful proposals to various funding agencies and publishers and tried not to internalize, but learn from, rejection. Ten years into my career as a university professor, I was awarded a one-year research fellowship by the National Endowment for the Humanities, and several years later I found the University of Toronto Press, which published *Charlotte Lennox: An Independent Mind* in 2018. While for me packaging the extant details of her life in the respected form of a well-researched, narrative biography that carefully

treated her writing seemed a kind of moral calling, without the tremendous support at both personal and professional levels there is absolutely no way this project would have been completed.

Even though it has not become a commercial bestseller, I am satisfied by the book's sales—and I am even more gratified by the dozen positive reviews in academic and popular publications. The dwindling numbers of academic monographs have been a long-lamented topic, but my sense was that University of Toronto Press saw this biography as coming along at an important moment in the history of the women's movement and that in addition to individual purchases, university libraries would invest. Around the publication date of this essay the database [World Cat](#) reported that five hundred and seventy-six university libraries around the world hold *Charlotte Lennox: An Independent Mind*.

Challenges, tensions, and strategies

Outlining some of the tensions that not infrequently paralyzed me and the ways to overcome those anxieties may, I hope, be helpful to future biographers of women creators. These tensions include that between an author's biography and her output, private and public life, financial and critical success, documenting and sensationalizing a life, truth and story, telling and speculation, and between fidelity to the period and contemporary relevance. One challenge is how to treat the relationship between an author's papers and her literary output. Biographical "evidence" might exist in the form of letters, journals, or other external accounts. These offer an outline of events and public record, but they only infrequently provide traces of a life represented consistently from within a subject. One cannot help but ask what the relationship is between those biographical "facts" and the motivations and creative impulses for the author's works.

Drawing connections between an author's experiences and the genres in which she crafts her texts, and the characters and plots she creates, is fascinating. However, doing so also requires care. Often, we cannot determine with any certainty why an author wrote what she did. But in the case of women authors who published, we can assume that their minds were frequently outside the personal and domestic sphere. I was inspired by the sentiments that were expressed by Margaret Anne Doody in her [2005 call](#) to potential biographers of women writers to listen attentively and patiently to the creative works of our subjects:

The desire for immediate relevance is very natural and in some ways even good—we must never press it too far, even expect any author (male or

female) to be speaking in our current terms. We have to have patience, imaginative patience if we are to write a good literary history. This means an attentiveness, a hearing of the books rather than talking to them straight away and overcrowding them with our interests, concerns, demands. A writer may have more to say than you are aware of. What she has to say may come as a surprise—and it may come in a way that seems halting or bizarre, because it speaks through a space—a space which may have been empty darkness, a void for her. ... What voices are we unable to hear now? What is passing through us as a void—sent out from a past long ago or recent, searching for hearers and searching our era in vain?

The more I read Lennox's texts, patterns emerged that helped me hear her calls for women's rights and responsibilities so that they could play an active role in society, culture, and politics. Of course, this also made me question how much my own moment in time was influencing my reading of Lennox. I could see that Lennox, while sometimes "halting and bizarre" for her own time, was writing in the service of a better future.

While attentively seeking out an author's motives is essential, how to employ available evidence, including the literary biographers' interpretations of an authors' texts, it is equally important to produce a compelling story responsibly. The first reality, of course, is what material about a life still exists. Some have noted that readers want to read about a "writer's pathologies" and the sensational elements of their lives.⁷ I have wondered, however, if this is truer of popular biographies than of critical ones, where readers are perhaps more interested in seeing carefully cited evidence about the connections between material circumstances and personality or experiences that move a writer to creative output and publication. A writer, like any human, has admirable and unpleasant qualities; and ultimately, we more deeply appreciate a person's complexity. An author who has not been studied much will become better known if she has a biography, but a critical biographer's job is to avoid colorful evocation without evidence and to show how that subject's life is interesting regardless of the sensational elements. Still, even in a meticulously well-documented biography there is a place for an occasional, responsible, speculative moment when a "may" can be scrupulously employed.

Another tension in writing a biography is between the belief in a true story or in a responsible story. The reality is that no biography is absolutely true. Instead, a biographer finds a thread (or two or three) that is central to the available material important to her subject, what is written by her, what her contemporaries have written about her, and what was happening in her community and the world

during her lifetime, and tries to remain faithful to that material. It was extremely important to me to document my sources carefully so that I left enough breadcrumbs for someone to retrace my steps and understand why I came to the conclusions I did. But the truth is that someone could look at the same material and make other deductions. As a matter of fact, I would consider that a high form of praise.

Perhaps the most fundamental challenge for a biographer is structure. Organizing principles not only address gaps in scholarship, but they work to appeal to current readers' interests and concerns. I divided the biography into sections that highlighted Lennox's engagement outside of the domestic sphere. "The American," "The Professional," and "The Celebrity" reflect her most notable public identities. These sections focus attention on Lennox's published works and the strategies she used to engage with a wide range of topics, including many that were not informed by gender. My book also begins with a chronology to situate Lennox's life events in relation to her publications. To demonstrate Lennox's gravitas in more tangible ways, I also included several appendices. For example, my extensive catalog of one hundred and fifteen "Publications, Reprints, and Editions" serves to illustrate not only the large number of her works but also the international reach of Lennox's publications. Also, twenty-eight color and black-and-white images of important places and people bring visual life to her story.

Another important issue is the definition of authorial "success," a term that is frequently employed to justify a monograph. We do not usually judge authors on their financial success, but it does seem to be an important indicator for some biographers. Factors that show literary skill and favorable reception are at least as important. These might include a number of editions, reprints, and translations, which show an author's wider reach beyond her immediate community; appearances in magazines and newspapers, both in the form of admiration for literary skills with lengthy biographical pieces, and praise by contemporary authors (as well as their imitation, adaptation, and offerings of introductions and prefaces); admiration by readers; commendation or critique by future authors; the author's skill at writing against convention; and/or promotion by the literary establishment, sales, and appearance in circulating and subscription library catalogs.

Our values for what make a figure "intellectually compelling" are also ultimately at stake in choosing a biographical subject. It seems hard to believe that in the second decade of the twenty-first century the different treatment of male and female subjects is a persistent reality. Concepts like "key intellectual" and "most important" raise the question of hierarchy (Rosenthal 2). But what is

“intellectual,” and how do we measure “importance”? When a biographer’s subject presents in the world as a man, the way he lives his masculinity is not as large a question in readers’ minds. However, when the subject moves through her world as a woman, her personal relationships with men, her role in domestic life, and the understood marginalization she experiences become larger topics. Unfortunately, too often the range of a woman writer’s intellectual work—and the vast amount of it—are not the focus of study.

It is also frequently assumed that when a woman writes fiction, she is likely writing more autobiographically than a man. When he writes in the same genres the presumption is that he is inventing. Unfortunately, if a biographer does not take care, the private and public life of female subjects tend to be tied together. Also, when writing about women authors there is a temptation to give more attention to what scholars have already begun to highlight, which is frequently her fiction, rather than her non-fiction. Since we understand women of the eighteenth century to be repeatedly coerced to remain in domestic spheres, we focus far more frequently on the domestic fiction of women authors, rather than on their non-fiction writing, which considers the world outside the home. And when we interpret the lives of women writers and their female characters, we too often assume that they fit into one of two categories: either she was intrepid or shrinking (Ezell 52). But what of the many women who had vast influence outside the home? The “complexities, contradictions, and contours” of a life are obviously the responsibility of the biographer (Looser 223).

In addition to these more theoretical concerns is a question of relevance, which is integrally connected to the concept of being “intellectually compelling.” Bringing a foreign world to life requires a careful sensitivity to the period, as well as an equal awareness of the current moment. How are women’s lives two hundred and fifty years ago different and not so different from those of the early twenty-first century? Preservation is a matter of canon, of access, and of reaching beyond the walls of academia. Certainly the #MeToo movement has improved public awareness of women’s experiences, but that consciousness does not seem to have dramatically altered fundamental beliefs about women’s minds, nor of their bodies. As I write this essay, another report about how the New York district attorney’s office faces harsh criticism over its handling of sex crimes, in large part because women’s experiences and their voices about their experiences are not taken as seriously as men’s ([Ransom](#)). Female authors and politicians are still asked the question, “What’s it like to be a wife, a mother *and* an author?” when male authors are not frequently probed in this way.⁸

We are still not fully comfortable with or, even believing or accepting of, women's reported experiences, nor of their autonomous minds. The [2019 Emilia Report](#), which compared reviews of male and female authors in the same market, summarizes that "women still aren't provided with an equal platform to men upon which their work can be judged" (Kean). With this fact in mind, how will literary biographies aid in the struggle to value women's agency and brainpower equally? Part of the answer is that we need to continue to seek perspective. Historical viewpoints can play an important role in the kinds of questions we ask of our current moment.

The value of early women writers in the minds of twenty-first-century readers includes biographers' attention to women's safety and how they navigate their own agency. Many women writers do not flatly lament women's plights but also celebrate women of all ages as both survivors and influencers, and they offer us a more robust "reckoning with the complex and varied ways that race, class, ability, age, religion, and sexuality create vectors of oppression and complicate narratives of sexual violence" (Dalley and Holzer 3). Our current moment in history undoubtedly can benefit from studying early published women who had great, or aspired to great, social influence. And thus, as Lana L. Dalley and Kellie Holzer describe, reading the works of historical women allows us to "use the momentum from #MeToo to reconceive how students and scholars [can] think in [more] highly contextual and specific ways" (Ibid). Writers' lives and works can shift our perspective on our current moment. Today's cultural vocabulary, such as "gaslighting," "toxic masculinity," and "mansplaining," offer us tools to look "backward in order to look forward" (Ehnenn 53 (c.f. Dalley and Holzer 15)). "Anachroniz[ing] the present" helps us all think better and hopefully to be better (Dalley and Holzer 16).

The future

While Lennox's career had all the makings of a long legacy, her hope for the success of *Original Works* did not materialize. She worked for four years to line up a printer, a dedicatee, the subscription support, and a lawyer, but the edition never saw the light of day. Unfortunately, we will likely never be known whether her intense self-advocacy for her rights to her own works cost her the important legacy of seeing those very texts published together. Lennox's fight for justice with her previous publishers and against Hannah Cowley, who was accused of stealing Lennox's *Sister* plot for her own play *The Runaway*, earned her enemies. It may be that in the moment that authors gained more rights, women's rights were—illogically—not considered as seriously. Instead, the once strong and lucrative favor of the literary world turned away from her. Or perhaps Lennox

simply did not personally know enough wealthy people to collect the necessary subscriptions.

Biography, which has been employed to show the worth of an author since the eighteenth century, is perhaps the most powerful way to promote the legacy of worthy authors. A life told in narrative form gives readers and future scholars the opportunity to attach flesh to the hand and mind that labored to craft writing that would stand the test of time. Thus, biographies of women writers can help bring little-known works into the light. My hope is that frequently hard-on-their-luck writers, marginalized by a white male power structure and yet persisting to publish outstanding and influential titles—regardless of the number or income—receive the attention they deserve. Among British women, Penelope Aubin, Elizabeth Carter, Hannah Cowley, Susannah Centlivre, Anne Finch, Elizabeth Griffith, Mary Leapor, and Sarah Scott are just a few examples. However, there are certainly eighteenth-century women in every country, such as Josefa Amar y Borbón in Spain and Meta Forkel-Liebesskind in Germany who have made important literary marks in eighteenth-century literature and deserve much greater attention. In addition, women all over Africa, including Ethiopian Queen *Məntəwwab*, were composing narratives during this period, most orally and a few in writing.⁹

In too many cases, women are only known as authors, and few other biographical details exist. However, in my experience, what seems at first like only a handful of facts can result in a compelling critical biography. In addition to feminist, gender, and sexuality studies, we should be studying these women through transnational frameworks of interpretation, questions of canon formation, the lens of biocultural studies, the history of publishing, early social media, consumer culture, and through a range of interdisciplinary cultural theories drawing on anthropology, geography, media studies, visual culture studies, postcolonial studies, ethnic and race studies, and more. These areas of study encourage questions and provide rich detail about the world in which a woman functioned. Even a single biographical fact can be explored to fascinating effect; however, until we gather as many facts as we can, show authors in their literary and historical context, and detail the value of women's writing, these once-celebrated figures will remain marginalized.

With the ever-increasing digital content that is opening history up to us more and more, we are continually able to uncover further parts to the story of eighteenth-century authorship. In fact, I recently learned that I had by no means found everything there was to know about Lennox. My biography included two engravings of Sir Joshua Reynolds' 1761 portrait of Lennox around the age of 31.

However, recently I learned of a second portrait, through a Twitter post, no less, by a colleague.¹⁰ This new image of Lennox was painted in 1777, just a year after she wrote of her concern about being “quite forgot.” The artist, John Smart, has been described as having “an unmistakable gift for catching a likeness” (Foskett 28). Lennox, then 47, was the living, breathing author of twelve publications, and her personality comes through in new ways. In this portrait she appears as a more experienced woman who can comfortably deliver an almost pleasant, yet potentially withering, side-eye.



John Smart, “Mrs. Charlotte Lennox,” 1777 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 49.122.1)

Given the timing of this painting in 1777, when Lennox was still working in earnest to publish *Original Works*, we might interpret her expression to be a kind of dare. As literary scholars, we need to be self-aware of our own subject positions, ideological tendencies, and assumptions about what works and authors are important. I include myself in this injunction to be aware of my own biases. The stories of the struggles and successes of women who could see how systems of oppression were designed to silence them need to be amplified, so that we do not continue to believe that the world functions and has been changed primarily by the actions and words of white men. We might entirely lose to history the fact that as the walls barring women's influence were becoming thicker, these women penned their experience and developed their imagination and that, for the first time, a sizeable amount of their published writing was distributed not only in the United Kingdom, but globally.

Sir Joshua Reynolds' and John Smart's portraits of Lennox, and Richard Samuel's *Nine Living Muses of Great Britain*, function to retain Lennox's value and memory. Today we have many more media forms that we can employ. Biographies are essential, but to help promote an author's legacy we must speak and act beyond the walls of academia. Today, physical presence through print publications, literary monuments, plays, and museum exhibitions, is certainly important. However, first-time readers will also learn about eighteenth-century authors on the digital feeds that they hold in their hands and which also accompany them in the supermarket line and the doctor's office waiting room. New Charlotte Lennox fans regularly join a community on Twitter and Instagram (@ladysmuseum); some find their way to her via Goodreads and though podcasts. Lennox might also benefit from a presence on TikTok as #BookTok. However, whether these ephemeral admirers will turn into devoted readers and advocates is still unclear.

Preservation is a matter of canon, of access, and of reaching beyond the walls of academia. The wildly successful "Will and Jane" 2016 Folger Library exhibition was designed to showcase how Shakespeare and Austen's literary celebrities came into being—and that at least two hundred years were necessary to cement their canonicity. Currently, although Lennox has not reached the levels of cultural saturation that Austen and Shakespeare enjoy, her work (though almost exclusively *The Female Quixote*) is widely taught and is perhaps more canonical than ever. The popular author Jane Smiley dedicated a chapter in her 2005 *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Novel* to Lennox's writing, Shakespeare critics regularly cite her, and her novel has been selected as one of twenty-two recommended eighteenth-century novels for teaching by the prominent and international publisher De Gruyter, extending Lennox's audience beyond students whose first language is English. We will continue to ask what the literary canon will look like one hundred years from now. Will Lennox be there? Or will English language readers even believe in a canon anymore? And what efforts might be worth pursuing to preserve those voices that have not received a fair reading?

Having accessible modern editions is an important first step. Modern print editions of all but one of Lennox's six novels have been produced, and a new open-access edition of the *Lady's Museum*, created by Karenza Sutton-Bennett and Kelly Plante is now available. "[Teaching the *Lady's Museum* and *Sophia: Imperialism, Early Feminism, and Beyond*](#)" by Sutton-Bennett and myself works in tandem with this site. We must keep in print, and update, editions of writing by women, and produce reliable, well-annotated, and accessible online editions of all of an author's work. We must promote all women's writing outside academia and show how they were important influencers, not only on Austen but on other areas

of literature, culture, and society. And we must continue to engage in questions about what is taught, and taught well, in English literature classrooms. While it might sound odd to current scholars, according to many of my students in their early twenties who are reading Shakespeare, Austen, and Lennox for the first time, Lennox is more enjoyable to read. If these young critics follow their current career path, they will still be teachers in 2060.

We can only wonder what literary scholars will be saying about what makes great literature in the second half of the twenty-first century. Regardless, we know that readers will persist; they will persist with opinions and share those opinions more widely than they could in the past. From what we can tell from our own limited vantage point, in the future individual readers—now through Twitter and Instagram accounts like @historia_en_femenino and @citeblackwomen—might in fact have a greater influence on what is considered “great” than former academic scholars and print publishing gatekeepers. Given this interactive social media landscape, readers and authors of the past have fascinating new opportunities for generating knowledge. In May 2020 @ladysmuseum stopped tweeting Lennox material and turned to lifting up BIPOC voices. In December, the account followed and retweeted #Bridgerton. I hope Lennox’s legacy in the digital world can include more voices and be more enlightened than she was herself. What would it take to convince Netflix that Charlotte Lennox’s eighteenth century would make a great television series as well?

Even with the increased desire to resurrect silenced voices, we cannot assume that women writers still will not be suppressed at much higher rates than their male counterparts. Will literary history take heed of Lennox’s repeated injunctions in her works to take the minds of women from all racial, cultural, and class backgrounds seriously? And thus, my urging extends Lennox’s own. Will we as scholars, academic associations and institutions, funding agencies, and publishers find the resources to give these extremely talented women their rightful place in the story of literary history?

Notes

This essay is part of a special issue: “Shaping the Legacy of 18th-Century Women,” guest edited by Marilyn Francus, *Aphra Behn Online* 13, no. 1 (Summer 2023). To read the essays in the cluster, follow this link: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol13/iss1/>.

¹ Until this moment, authors were subjected to perpetual copyright, which meant that booksellers were only required to pay authors at first purchase and then had the rights to the work in perpetuity. The landmark 1774 *Donaldson v. Becket* decision by the House of Lords is often

celebrated as a victory for authors. (See Lennox to Dr. William Hunter, February 18, 1775; Schürer, 189-91, esp. n.3)

² See Joanna Russ, *How to Suppress Women's Writing*.

³ Betty A. Schellenberg expertly describes the progression since 1986 in her essay "Writing Eighteenth-Century Women's Literary History, 1986 to 2006."

⁴ By 2000, Norbert Schürer and I had teamed up, and our shared interest in Lennox meant that we passed resources back and forth. Needless to say, his *Charlotte Lennox Correspondence and Miscellaneous Documents* was invaluable as I completed the biography.

⁵ For example, Heidi Bostic's early twenty-first-century experience: "A couple of years ago, the cognitive scientist Virginia Valian visited my campus to talk about her book *Why So Slow? The Advancement of Women*. Her book provides scientific, experimental evidence of continuing discrimination against women in academe, including a case in which women researchers were systematically given less lab space than men and a study showing that identical grant proposals were given a lesser score if a woman's name appeared on them as opposed to a man's. During that visit, I had the opportunity to ask Valian about the advisability of women scholars like me pursuing research about women. She unequivocally recommended against it, on the grounds that such work would not be taken seriously" (American Society of Eighteenth-Century Studies, "[Women's Caucus History](#)").

⁶ Here I must note a setback that—at the time—was devastating and traumatic. I include this misfortune in a footnote, perhaps symbolically, because I had to force myself to put it at the back of my mind to proceed with the biography. During my move from Arizona to California, my car was broken into and the box containing all my research was stolen. Although much of this research was included in my dissertation, I am very grateful to my dean, Dee Abrahamse, for funds to return to the libraries I had previously consulted and make new photocopies.

⁷ John Richetti writes, "The most colorful or scandalous features of certain writers' lives – Hemingway's depression, Balzac's gourmandizing, Dickens's love life, Dostoyevsky's gambling addiction, James's ambiguous sexuality, Faulkner's alcoholism, Swift's tortured relationships with women, Pope's physical handicaps – acquire their fascination for readers through their association with their literary accomplishments, although in some cases one might argue that their works can be better understood by contemplating the pathologies out of which (or in spite of which) they seem to have grown"(67).

⁸ On July 1, 2021 novelist Siri Hustvedt noted that she and other public women are still frequently asked this question ([Freiheit](#)).

⁹ Using schwas is the most proper way to spell Queen *Məntəwwab*'s name. However, there are many spellings, including Mentewaab and Mentewab. I am indebted to Wendy Belcher for her advice.

¹⁰ Thank you, Brad Pasanek.

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