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Introduction: Shaping the Legacy of 18th-Century Women

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Introduction: Shaping the Legacy of 18th-Century Women

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As the contributors to Jennie Batchelor and Gillian Dow's *Women's Writing, 1660-1830: Feminisms and Futures* demonstrate, there is still much compelling work being done in the writing of women's history, and the recovery project is no longer just the discovery of long lost or forgotten women writers.¹ Scholars are discovering the effects of anonymity and pseudonymity on discerning female authorship; they are analyzing actresses and their performances as forms of authorship. Scholars are studying women writers of children's literature and their professionalization; they are measuring the circulation of women writers through sales catalogues. Scholars are excavating women and material culture; they are understanding women writers in light of regionalism and ethnicity within Great Britain—and developing a pan-European, and a global, eighteenth-century vision of women.²

Of course, the recovery project does not proceed unquestioned. As scholars, we need to think about what we are doing with the information about these newly-found women, the history that we are excavating, and the consequences of an expanding canon—as well as consider the contexts in which these women's lives and work were lost, the ways that they have been recuperated, and how their lives and works now reverberate through time. In other words, scholarship must grapple with issues of legacy, which is the consequence of recovery: both the formation of legacy and the implications of legacy of women writers. In its historiographical function, legacy documents and makes sense of recovery—and legacy grants recovery ideological power.

This special issue of *Aphra Behn Online* assembles a group of scholars for a twofold purpose: (1) to analyze the ways that narrative, genre, media, and institutions have had an impact on the legacy of eighteenth-century women, and (2) to suggest ways that we, as scholars, can shape the legacy of eighteenth-century women. Our professional choices have consequences—political, social, cultural, and educational consequences—just as the choices of the scholars in the 1970s and 1980s, who began the recovery of women writers, did. Many of those scholars established women's studies courses, programs, and societies, and later, digital projects, laying the groundwork for subsequent generations of scholars.³ This special issue on legacy looks to build on the work of our predecessors, and point the ways to the future.

Accordingly, this special issue on legacy participates in a scholarly conversation about women writers and artists after the first phases of the recovery were largely completed. In 1993 Margaret Ezell in her *Writing Women's Literary History* was among the first to suggest, as Devoney Looser put it, that “women writers in the past ought not to be slotted as either feminist heroines or patriarchal victims” and

to advocate for a more nuanced reading of women's literary history.⁴ Jean Marsden went further in 2002, arguing that scholars needed to be more self-aware of their own ideological tendencies: that they projected their contemporary feminist ideology onto women writers of the past, and avoided women writers who did not fit their ideological criteria.

There were critiques that the very act of recovering women was marginalizing women writers. As Laura Rosenthal wrote in 2009, "Each figure under consideration becomes a particular example of a 'woman writer; rather than as, say, 'one of the most important playwrights of the Restoration' or 'a key intellectual force in shaping eighteenth-century cosmopolitanism.' Is there a way, then, to recover from recovery? Will our attention to women writers at some point transcend the category of 'women writers'? Should it?"⁵ And there were assessments that the term "woman" was essentialist in the wake of poststructuralism, and that "woman" was being presented as a universal term, eliding racial, class, and ethnic distinctions—all of which brought into question women's studies as a field.⁶ With the rise of gender studies, the recovery project has expanded into queer studies and transgender studies, which also challenged women's studies to rethink its position as a field, and to engage with these fields in new paths of synergistic research.

The scholars in this special issue take the value of recovering women as a given.⁷ We happily co-exist with gender studies and performance studies, and partake in interdisciplinarity and intersectionality. Our operating assumption is that women's studies is capacious, and should be. We choose to be self-aware: neither projecting feminism onto the subjects of our study, nor rejecting the feminist possibilities and implications of our analyses of eighteenth-century women and legacy.

The essays in this special issue seek to identify the factors that shape literary and cultural history, and legacy. By doing so, this special issue also has an activist purpose: to motivate scholars to use those factors to shape our field, and ideally, the discourse of eighteenth-century women beyond academia. It is imperative to make women's voices audible and women's narratives visible in an age in which women's rights to education, reproductive freedom, and political agency are at risk around the globe.

The power to shape legacy is urgent in a time when the humanities, and women's studies in particular, continue to lose institutional funding and governmental support.⁸ While women's literature is now taught with some regularity in high school and college curricula, the extent to which we have been able to integrate

recently recovered women writers outside of women's studies courses is far from clear. (There are more British women writers included in the Norton, Longman, and Broadview anthologies of British literature; whether instructors are including those women writers on their syllabi is another question.) While Jane Austen's image is now on the £10 note in England, as is too often the case, the recognition of Austen is the exception, not the rule. In this moment, when statues are freighted with so much ideological meaning, it is significant that it took eight years for the "Mary on the Green" campaign to raise the funds for a statue to commemorate Mary Wollstonecraft in Newington Green in London—where 90 percent of the statues memorialize men.⁹

The hard-won accomplishments of women's studies are still not secure within academia or beyond, and it is our task to secure them and go further. At a moment when our relationship to history is more important—and perhaps more contested—than ever, it is crucial that we speak.

Insofar as scholars have a voice to shape the legacy of women, we should take every opportunity to use it—and as these essays demonstrate, that requires analyzing the mechanisms of legacy, so that we can speak effectively.

Notes

This introduction 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, refer to these links:

1. Kristina Straub, "Elizabeth Boyd's Disappearing Act: Performing Literary Legacy on the Georgian Stage," <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol13/iss1/2/>.
2. Srividhya Swaminathan, "Women, Slavery, and the Archive: Innovations in Slavery Studies and Contemporary Connections," <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol13/iss1/3/>.
3. Laura Engel, "Forgotten Encounters: The Legacy of Sculptresses and Female Muses," <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol13/iss1/4/>.
4. Susan Carlile, "'Before I am Quite Forgot': Women's Critical Literary Biography and the Future," <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol13/iss1/5/>.
5. Marilyn Francus, "Why Austen, not Burney? Tracing the Mechanisms of Reputation and Legacy," <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol13/iss1/6/>.
6. Kim Simpson, "Chawton House and its Library: Legacies and Futures," <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/abo/vol13/iss1/7/>.

¹ Traditional recovery work continues apace, however: see Clark on Sarah Harriet Burney, the novelist; Contourgouis and Denis on Hannah Humphrey, the caricature printseller; Russell on women dictionary writers and makers; Germann on locating Black women in Georgian London; and Eckerle and McAreavey's *Women's Life Writing and Early Modern Ireland*.

² See Batchelor; McGirr; Grenby; Coolahan and Empey; Smith; Prescott; and Dow, respectively. See also Levy on women booksellers, Ozment on women stationers, and Runia's collection, *The Future of Feminist Eighteenth-Century Scholarship: Beyond Recovery*.

³ Scholars like Susan Brown, Patricia Clements, and Isobel Grundy, the founders of Orlando: Women's Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present (see "[The Orlando Project Team](#)"); the founders of the Women Writers Project, Patricia Caldwell, Stuart Curran, Margaret Ezell, Elizabeth Hageman, and Susanne Woods (see "[Women Writers Project People](#)"); Juliet McMaster, the founder of the pedagogical publishing project of the long 18th century, the Juvenilia Press (see "[Our Patron and Sponsors](#)"); and Ruth Perry, founder of the Women's Studies program at MIT (see "[About Us](#)"), and co-founder of the Graduate Consortium of Women's Studies (see "[History of the Consortium](#)"). There are many more.

⁴ Looser, 222. Ezell was writing when French psychoanalytical feminism and New Historicism were critical forces to contend with, as she notes in her introduction (7-10). But the impetus for her study was that "...feminist literary history has reached the level of critical development and self-confidence necessary to examine its own hidden assumptions as carefully as it has done those of the orthodox critics" (6). See Goss for a recent discussion questioning the premises and limits of recovery.

⁵ Rosenthal, 2.

⁶ See Cvetkovich, et. al., especially comments by Fraiman and Stanford Friedman.

⁷ See Looser on being challenged to justify writing women's history. As Looser argues, there are significant gaps of information that remain in women's history (even for prominent women, and more so for lesser known women); women writers were perceived in the past as a group, and we need to understand them in that context; and the masses of new information from databases allows scholars to reconceptualize the condition of their literary production and the reception of their work—and literary history itself.

⁸ As Binhammer and Clery suggest, politics and economics shape research endeavors—not only in terms of the funding available for women's studies, but the ways that women's studies scholars respond to cultural readings of feminism, as well as political and economic power. See the special issue of *Feminist Studies* (2018) on women's and gender studies graduate programs, especially the articles by Gupta, Stanford Friedman, and Soderling, et. al.

⁹ See "Mary on the Green: Raising a Memorial," <https://www.maryonthegreen.org>; see also Slawson, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/may/16/maggi-hambling-picked-to-create-mary-wollstonecraft-statue>.

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