

Introduction¹

In the decades since Anne K. Mellor published her landmark essay “A Criticism of Their Own,” literary criticism by early women writers has drawn increasing interest.² Among just a few of the recent studies examining criticism by pre-twentieth-century British women, Kimberly J. Stern has demonstrated that women critics negotiated the gender ideologies of nineteenth-century critical networks to reimagine the professional literary communities they sought to join.³ Megan Peiser details the ways Anna Letitia Barbauld and Elizabeth Moody exploit the critical authority offered through anonymous novel reviewing to support the work of other women writers.⁴ Nora Nachumi’s essay in an MLA volume on *Teaching British Women Playwrights of the Restoration and Eighteenth Century* (2010) outlines the value of incorporating Elizabeth Inchbald’s prefaces to *The British Theatre* (1808) into study of Inchbald’s dramatic works.⁵ My own work has promoted access to early British women’s criticism, considered its contributions to women writers’ increasing professionalization in a rapidly changing print culture, and demonstrated women’s influence on aesthetic standards and the construction of British cultural heritage.⁶ These works and others have contributed to our growing understanding of the extent and significance of early criticism published by British women.

¹ Portions of this essay previously appeared as the Introduction to [British Women Writers of the Romantic Period: An Anthology of Their Literary Criticism](#) (Palgrave, 2009), ed. Mary A. Waters.

² Anne K. Mellor, “A Criticism of Their Own: Romantic Women Literary Critics,” *Questioning Romanticism*, ed. John Beer, John Hopkins UP, 1995.

³ Kimberly J. Stern, *The Social Life of Criticism: Gender, Critical Writing, and the Politics of Belonging*, U of Michigan P, 2016.

⁴ Megan Peiser, “Reviewing Women: Women Reviewers on Women Novelists,” *Women’s Periodicals and Print Culture in Britain, 1690-1820s: The Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. Jennie Batchelor and Manushag N. Powell, The Edinburgh History of Women’s Periodical Culture in Britain, Edinburgh UP, 2018

⁵ Nora Nachumi, “To Write with Authority: Elizabeth Inchbald’s Prefaces to *The British Theatre*,” *Teaching British Women Playwrights of the Restoration and Eighteenth Century*, ed. Bonnie Nelson and Catherine Burroughs, Modern Language Association of America, 2010;

⁶ Mary A. Waters, “Letitia Landon’s Literary Criticism and Her Romantic Project: L.E.L.’s Poetics of Feeling and the Periodical Reviews,” *Women’s Writing* vol. 18, 2011, pp. 305-330; Mary A. Waters, [British Women Writers and the Profession of Literary Criticism, 1789-1832](#), Palgrave Studies in the Enlightenment, Romanticism and the Cultures of Print, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004; Mary A. Waters, “‘The First of a New Genus’: Mary Wollstonecraft as

As Peiser notes, however, particularly in the case of the periodical criticism on which her essay depends, identification of and access to women's literary criticism remains a challenge. Periodical criticism was often published anonymously, and even when identification is possible, assembling a body of work for teaching or research can be laborious at best. This archive collects criticism published by women during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to enrich study of their creative works, to challenge narrow assumptions about where women's literary commentary appeared and the breadth of issues it addressed, and to reveal the conscious authority of women writers' critical voices. At the same time, in presenting women's views on literature and aesthetics, this collection can encourage new perspectives on the nature, purposes, and principles of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary criticism, regardless of who may be the author.

I. Aesthetic Innovations

Study of criticism by women reveals that women critics could be in the vanguard of debates over literary standards and aesthetics. For example, Wordsworth's 1800 preface to *Lyrical Ballads* is considered a landmark in early nineteenth-century literary theory for its explanation of the premises behind a collection of poems that broke new ground in both form and content. Yet in her "Introductory Discourse" to *Plays on the Passions* (1798), Joanna Baillie articulated several of Wordsworth's most innovative ideas while anticipating his treatise by two years. Convinced that psychological states were more interesting than external events, Baillie devoted her preface and indeed her writing career to exploring how such powerful but shifting internal effects could be conveyed in their full subtlety to a theater audience. Even earlier, Mary

a Literary Critic and Mentor to Mary Hays," *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 37, 2004, pp. 415-34; Mary A. Waters, "'Slovenly Monthly Catalogues': The *Monthly Review* and Anna Letitia Barbauld's Periodical Literary Criticism," *Nineteenth-Century Prose*, vol. 31, 2004, pp. 53-81.

Wollstonecraft had voiced many of Wordsworth's views in similar language in her 1797 essay "On Artificial Taste," published in *The Monthly Magazine*, where she explores the relationship between immediate feeling and direct experience of nature on one hand and "natural," affecting poetry on the other. It diminishes none of these writers to recognize that all were concerned with finding a smooth conduit between emotional experience and literary expression. Rather, reading all three can enhance our appreciation of the relationship between emotional authenticity, communication of feeling, and literary language, one of the more significant aesthetic concerns of the early nineteenth century. Baillie's essay, like Wordsworth's, prefaced a collection of her own work – in this case, several plays – so differing from familiar practices that she felt readers would need a framework to appreciate them. And like Wordsworth's preface, Baillie's "Introductory Discourse" develops a coherent theory for a literary form – in her case closet drama – that comprises an important contribution to a major literary genre.⁷

A milestone in literary criticism and theory, Baillie's is not the only major essay penned by a woman to revise genre theory and history. Coming a decade later, "On the Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing," Anna Barbauld's introductory essay to the fifty-volume collection *The British Novelists*, offered an early contribution to genre classification and literary theory as well as a prototypical canon of British fiction. Barbauld's essay and her individual introductions to featured novelists revised literary history in ways that gave unprecedented attention to the contribution of women writers. At the same time, she argued that fictional literature deserved more respect than most critics were willing to grant it. As the introduction to the first definitive selection of complete text British novels, the essay appeared in a context that had few rivals in either prestige or appeal to national pride.

⁷See Catherine Burroughs, *Closet Stages: Joanna Baillie and the Theater Theory of British Romantic Women Writers* (U of Pennsylvania P: Philadelphia, 1997).

When women's criticism enjoyed the prominence of Barbauld's "Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing," it was because of, not despite, the critic's name. By the time Barbauld's essay appeared, she had gained renown as a poet, educator, children's author, political polemicist, literary biographer, critic, and editor. The full title of the collection, boasting "with an essay, and prefaces biographical and critical, by Mrs. Barbauld," indicates the prestige and commercial appeal that the publishers hoped to gain from Barbauld's name. Much like Barbauld, Elizabeth Inchbald was likewise recruited to write criticism because of her celebrity, in her case as a popular actress, playwright, and novelist, yet her criticism broke new ground as well. Inchbald's prefaces to the individual plays included in *The British Theatre* (1806-8) turned away from established models of Shakespeare criticism to emphasize staging and theatrical history, helping to shift the direction of theater criticism for decades to come. Meanwhile, although Inchbald's essays appeared first as individual installments, when brought together for the 1808 bound set, they offer, as did Baillie's "Introductory Discourse," a coherent theory of closet drama.

Like Barbauld's "Origin and Progress of Novel-Writing," the *British Theatre* bound set appealed to the burgeoning sense of British national pride and the expanding consumer market for the appurtenances of elegant sophistication, but it was priced well out of reach of all but the most affluent middle- and upper-class readers. But against the consumer-driven status of an attractively bound matching set stands the other form in which Inchbald's prefaces appeared – brief essays, each introducing a single recently popular play, published in inexpensive, weekly installments. Though lacking the grandeur of the costly collection, this more ephemeral form of publication could reach a wider, more diverse audience.

II. Literary Reviewing

While the prestige of prefatory essays to major collections is undeniable, no criticism by Romantic-era British women writers reached as many readers and yet has been as underrated as that in literary magazines, especially literary reviews. Especially toward the end of the eighteenth century, the number of literary magazines and reviews increased dramatically while at the same time women began to contribute to these new periodicals more frequently. As was generally the practice in periodical criticism, most of these articles were published unsigned. Consequently, although letters, diary entries, editors' marked copies, and the like have led to some attributions of women's periodical criticism, it is impossible to gauge how much can no longer be identified. Yet the invisibility of this work belies its importance. James Basker argues that literary journalism

introduced new, more accessible forums for critical discussion; it multiplied and diversified the opportunities for critical expression; it fostered new critical values, drew attention to new literary genres, systematized the treatment of established ones, and expanded the audience for criticism. [...] in subtler ways it affected canon formation, reception history, the emergence of affective criticism, the assimilation of foreign influences, the segregation of 'women's literature', and ultimately the politics of culture.⁸

And if literary periodicals so dramatically influenced aesthetics, culture, and critical practice, they had a similar impact on Romantic writers' careers. Reviewing and similar literary commentary provided both income and an avenue to public authority, and many women writers followed this model of professionalism.

⁸James Basker, "Criticism and the Rise of Periodical Literature," *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* Vol. 4 *The Eighteenth Century*, ed. H.B. Nisbet and Claude Rawson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 316-332; 316.

A. Establishing Literary Authority in a Changing Print Culture

The earliest women literary critics usually came from the genteel classes. These women had access to education and leisure to read and write. Moreover, until the end of the eighteenth century, the nature of publishing explicitly emphasized the amateur or dilettante, especially in the case of women. Most women writers, critics included, emerged from the aristocratic milieu of coterie publication. Access to publishers depended on these connections, in the form of either a single prestigious patron or a subscription in which acquaintances and their connections would underwrite the cost of publication. Within these networks, writing entertained one's acquaintances and displayed one's talents. Though publishing might bring much needed money to a writer patronized by the more affluent members of the circle, the ostensible purpose of disseminating a work was to expand the circle of edification and enjoyment. But as the eighteenth century drew to a close, patronage forms of publication gave way to a more modern, professional literary culture where contracts and direct transactions between publisher and writer became paramount, where relationships between writers and publishers were more direct and might include various types of literary work, and where publishers might rely on writers' current specializations and expect writers to cultivate new ones. While the numbers of women publishing in all forms increased rapidly, the ever more commercialized literary world came more firmly under control of the male dominated world of large publishing houses and heavyweight literary magazines and reviews. Among those women who best adapted to this masculine world of early professionalized literary culture, authoring literary criticism often played a decisive role.

The landscape of British women's literary history would present a very different view if it were not for criticism's financial, intellectual, and even emotional impact. Criticism brought

poet Elizabeth Moody, for example, into a circle of literary professionals that nudged her out of the amateur world of coterie circulation into commercial publication of both her creative and her critical work. For others such as Mary Wollstonecraft, criticism provided the financial stability to launch a literary career. Writing on demand for bookseller Joseph Johnson and especially reviewing for his new *Analytical Review* allowed Wollstonecraft to escape the lonely, taxing positions of governess and companion and establish herself in London, where she joined the most vibrant literary community in late eighteenth-century Britain. Further, for Wollstonecraft and some other young writers such as Harriet Martineau and Letitia Landon, reading for a demanding schedule of reviewing provided intellectual training, broadening and deepening their thinking and preparing them for the creative or analytical work for which they are best known today. And for Barbauld, criticism appears to have sustained her financially while providing her, according to her niece and first biographer, with an intellectual and emotional lifeline at the time of her husband's mental collapse and eventual suicide.⁹

When literary culture had been supported largely by patronage, authors knew much of their audience, either personally or implicitly as connections of a patron or acquaintance. Mostly from the genteel classes, these readers were better educated than the general run of English men and women, and their taste had usually been formed on classical literature and more recent works modeled on the classical tradition. But late in the eighteenth century, authors and critics began to realize that the makeup of the reading population had changed, and that many new readers lacked the education and hence the commonly agreed upon standards of taste that the literary world had formerly counted on. In the minds of some, the spread of reading and the variety of new types of publications undermined a social order where the makeup of the reading public could be known

⁹See Lucy Aikin, *The Works of Anna Laetitia Barbauld. With a Memoir by Lucy Aikin*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, et. al., 1825).

and standards of taste assumed to be shared. Many critics saw a need to generate broader acceptance for the literary values they regarded as desirable and they began to try to police the taste of these new readers, demonstrating that aesthetic standards were far from self-evident, but were instead subject to lively debate. Meanwhile, it was not merely authors and critics who experienced anxieties about the new readers. Regarding familiarity with literature as a necessary mark of gentility, the expanding middle class that made up most of these new readers turned to criticism, especially in periodicals, for guidance in developing their literary taste.¹⁰ Yet the popularity of scores of novels scorned in reviews reveals a disquieting gap between the critic and an anonymous reading public with inclinations that resisted critical discipline.

B. Revising Aesthetic Standards

If criticism failed to fully control public response to literary works, aesthetic standards shifted as well. While the neoclassical standards that had once held wide currency lost much favor by the end of the eighteenth century, some of the ideals that were central at the beginning of the nineteenth century have likewise declined in appeal since. Sentimentality, for example, was a hotly debated topic, and in its more florid manifestations critics often objected that it debased a literary work, making it suitable only for a sensation market. But when modulated, emotional content enjoyed broad currency during much of the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many readers and writers believed that emotional appeals offered a route for literature to help better society by cultivating individual sensitivity and sympathy.¹¹ Thus, sentiment and sensibility underlay much of the interest in moral effect that was common to many critics, male

¹⁰See Basker and William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004).

¹¹See especially G.J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 1992); Jerome McGann, *The Poetics of Sensibility: A Revolution in Literary Style* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1996); John Mullan, *Sentiment and Sociability: The Language of Feeling in the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1988); and Adela Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion: Epistemologies of Emotion, Hume to Austen* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996).

and female, during the later years of the eighteenth century. In fact, the demand for a positive moral tendency was in itself a contested issue. Some critics followed Samuel Johnson in suggesting that literature should teach moral values by presenting only the highest examples worthy of emulation. Yet others, such as Barbauld, explicitly argue that literature need not conform to such restrictive standards, nor, indeed need it explicitly serve a higher social purpose. Barbauld champions the central significance of other qualities such as entertainment value, form, versification, imagery, characterization, means of creating suspense, and credibility or realism.

Meanwhile, not only did shifting standards mean that few aesthetic ideals could claim general acceptance, but in addition, many literary reviews had not yet acknowledged aesthetic evaluation to be part of their task. During the first half-century of the literary review, the imposition of the critic's own opinion was often considered a corruption in the true purposes of a review. Many critics presumed a highly educated and almost exclusively male audience, whom they assumed to be capable of making their own judgments about literature. The review's purpose was to present objective summary and extract to facilitate those judgments. But by the end of the eighteenth century, literary reviews found much of their readership among the expanding middle class, including middle-class women. Many of these readers had only modest formal education, and in reading about literature, they sought the kind of guidance provided in one important predecessor for literary reviews – popular periodical papers along the lines of Joseph Addison's *Spectator* and Samuel Johnson's *Rambler*. These forebears showcased the merits of literary works, educating readers about literature and aesthetics and helping form reader taste.

If such high-minded aspirations informed part of the purpose of some criticism, entertainment often played a vital role as well. Indeed, while many articles aspired to objectivity,

others strove for entertainment in the criticism itself. Women critics might strive for entertainment by such means as structuring a critical essay in the form of a dialog, as did Ann Radcliffe, a strategy that allowed for posing multiple critical perspectives while integrating some of the diverting qualities of fiction and drama. In some cases, too, wit and irony allowed a bridge between the older cultures of coterie circulation and modern mass publication, as when Elizabeth Moody masquerades as a male writer enjoying tobacco and port with his reading. While Moody's urbane, satirical tone would have amused most readers, only the few who knew the anonymous author to be a woman could have fully appreciated the humor. In other instances, articles that repeat assessments that had already become commonplace, such as Maria Jane Jewsbury's essay on Jane Austen, suggest that readers sometime cared as much for the pleasure of affirming comfortably accepted ideas as for original and rigorous criticism. The fact that some of these articles held the prestigious lead article positions confirms that this purpose was accepted by publishers and readers alike.

C. Further Insights

Much remains to be uncovered in early literary criticism by women. A few additional issues have already emerged, however, that are worth noting. For one, women critics often used commentary on literature to participate in wide-ranging debates on topics of public concern. While talking about literature, women comment on public events or call attention to the ways literature affects public issues. Their comments on British character or the British literary heritage, for example, demonstrate that they understood national identity and character as historically and culturally determined. When women critics speak of literature's influence on individual virtue, for instance, they frequently do so in terms of the ways literature shapes national character. Moreover, women critics show strong interest in women writers. Not only do

women critics frequently praise other women writers, but they sometimes capitalize on the occasion of reviewing one female writer to promote other women writers, as when Jewsbury endorses Caroline Bowles while writing on Jane Austen. Yet women critics often hold their female contemporaries to exacting standards, refusing to follow the example of feigned tolerance that provided a thin veneer for their male contemporaries' clubby assurance of feminine literary inferiority. Where women critics include patronizing expressions like "the fair author," close reading of the discussion often reveals elements of parody or humor.

III. Conclusion

There is much to be gained, then, from incorporating early women's literary criticism into our study of our literary past. The aspiration in creating this archive is to make this criticism more accessible, encouraging teaching, research, and enjoyment of this rich resource. It is to be hoped that doing so will give rise to new researchers, new questions, and new insights about not only early women's criticism, but early women writers and literary history as a whole.