

THE ENGLISH NOVEL OF THE 18th CENTURY AND FEMINIST LITERARY CRITICISM

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The article proposes the comments on the prominent works of the influential representatives of feminist critics of the last decades of the 20th century, who seek to specify the approaches to the rise of the English novel of the 18th century. Inheriting the idea of gender difference between male and female writing styles, authorship and reader's reception of the text, feminist literary critics try to debate with Ian Watt who links the origins of the novel genre with the growing influence of the middle class, the widening of book market and publishing, the interest of leading artists in the literary technique of formal realism. Nancy Armstrong in a famous article devoted to the contribution of feminism to novel studies emphasizes that before the emergence of feminist school and literary criticism, the researchers evaluated novel texts in the coordinates of traditional axiology. Thanks to feminist project, a transition happened in the reception of classics. Proceeding from the category of "gender difference", feminist critics stand at the origin of a gender-oriented reinterpretation of the history of British literature. They will revise the academic literary canon, returning the names of women writers, describing their texts, creating the modern reader as well as initiating the innovative research methodology.

Until the 1980s, according to Nancy Armstrong, when feminism emerged as a major force in novel studies, scholars and critics read novels novelistically. Feminist literary theory made an intervention in this way of reading British fiction, when it persuaded a whole generation of readers to consider what female protagonists lacked rather than their male counterparts.

Feminist critics (Nancy Armstrong, Helen Moglen, Toni Bowers) notice that the final three decades of the twentieth century witnessed the development of a number of new critical orientations committed to recognizing "categories of difference." Gender difference was among the earliest such categories to be addressed, and, by now, work that takes gender fundamentally into account has provided eighteenth-century studies with a vastly expanded set of textual objects and authorial personae, as well as new methods and purposes.

Women's studies, feminist criticism, and gender studies, Toni Bowers states, became intellectually and professionally acceptable, then indispensable, scholarly undertakings. By now gender studies has in its turn spawned other previously unthought directions for research. "Gender studies" has not only taught eighteenth-century scholars to notice this or that individual writer, continues T. Bowers, it has also taught scholars to ask previously unthought kinds of questions, to give careful attention to previously unregarded categories of materials, and to listen closely to previously silenced groups of voices.

The historical contributions of gender scholarship to eighteenth-century studies are unlikely to be foreclosed by new kinds of work, but gender studies may well be changed by developing interpretive trends. After all, difference includes gender difference, but does not stop there. Groundbreaking scholarship in the future can be expected to take fully on board a recognition of a number of crucial differences—those made by location, historical position, language, culture, age, rank, ethnicity, politics, material circumstances, and patterns of economic distribution, for instance—in addition to gender difference. No single scholar will be able to dictate the terms of such discussions. After all, it is at the level of the most fundamental assumptions and procedures that gender-oriented scholarship has made a lasting impact on eighteenth-century studies, and it will be at the same level that this scholarship will change and develop in the future, in response to new challenges.

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