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Pleas for Respectability:  
Eighteenth-Century Women Writers Theorizing the Novel

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**Abstract**

The emergence and development of the modern novel used to be viewed as a largely masculine affair. However, over the past few decades, researchers and scholars have started to re-evaluate and acknowledge the importance of women's literary and theoretical work to the rise and evolution of the genre. This article adds to these revisionist efforts by contributing to the ongoing discussion on the theoretical legacy left by some of the most notable British women writers of the long eighteenth century. The article analyses several texts (prefaces, dedications, dialogues, essays, reviews) in which they expressed their perspectives on questions situated at the core of the eighteenth-century debates concerning the novel. The critical and theoretical perspectives advanced by these writers are approached as contributions to the novel's status as a respectable literary genre and, implicitly, as self-legitimizing efforts.

**Keywords:** eighteenth-century British novel, women writers, novel beginnings, theory of the novel

The long eighteenth century<sup>1</sup> is seen as a crucial moment in the history of the novel. Viewed either as the point of origin or, at least, as a revolutionary stage in the evolution of the genre, the eighteenth century has undoubtedly brought a significant and consequential contribution to shaping the modern novel. As Michael McKeon noted, if today's scholar can defend the thesis of the ancient roots of the genre,<sup>2</sup> for the eighteenth-century writer the emphasis was on the novelty of this type of prose fiction ("Prose Fiction" 238). Understandably, this newness also became the greatest challenge because the rules of classical theory were no longer

of assistance, although many writers of the day derived their theoretical accounts of the novel from the classical tradition. This provocative new way of writing that some found intriguing, while others seemed determined to stigmatize, invited stimulating debates and discussions among the writers and the critics of the day, and thus began to create its own theoretical foundation. Since the novel was, at the time, perceived as a new literary genre, women writers were not newcomers to an ongoing discussion, but direct contributors to its generic shaping and consolidation.

The development of the novel and of the critical and theoretical discourses it engendered used to be seen as a male-dominated affair. British literary histories tended to credit Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, and Samuel Richardson as the begetters of the genre, a thesis advanced by Ian Watt's influential work, *The Rise of the Novel*. Watt does note that "the majority of eighteenth-century novels were actually written by women" (298), but presents the facts from a purely quantitative perspective, with no interest in any qualitative exploration. This attitude towards women's writing was perpetuated by many critical and historical approaches to the novel throughout the twentieth century (K. Williams 113). However, since the 1980s, new research intent on reconsidering the contribution of eighteenth-century British women writers<sup>3</sup> to the theory and practice of the novel has produced a series of canonical mutations. The impact of these writers, though ignored for a long time, proved significant enough to change the traditional thesis on the eighteenth-century British novel. As John Richetti points out, the claim can be made "that the novel represents and promotes a feminizing transformation of British culture" (190). It is to these revisionist efforts<sup>4</sup> that my essay adds by exploring the critical and theoretical perspectives expressed by some of the most notable and prolific eighteenth-century British women writers with regard to the definition, generic parentage, aesthetic standards, purpose, and social impact of what was then seen as an emerging literary genre.

The eighteenth-century cultural scene offered women writers the occasion to thrive, and an increasing number of women made a living by their pen. However, despite the financial opportunities offered by the book

market, women writers had to work in a rather unfavourable critical climate and seldom were their literary or critical efforts taken seriously. Women writers used to be seen as second-rate citizens of the 'Republic of Letters,' tolerated, but unworthy of consideration. Their efforts were continuously discouraged by societal constraints and by the contempt displayed by fellow male writers and critics, all the more so in the field of literary criticism and theory (Castle 434-38). The disparaging attitude towards the critical and theoretical contributions of women writers was not necessarily related to the quality of their work. Rather, as Terry Castle argues, it "drew much of its particular animus ... from larger impinging professional jealousies" and from what was perceived as a "sort of illegitimate hankering after authority" (436-37). Throughout the long eighteenth century, women writers worked in and expressed critical opinions on a variety of literary genres. The case has already been made that, as practitioners, "much of women's best writing was in forms other than the novel" (Staves 2). However, as critics, women tended to prefer "more demotic and inclusive genres" and their "most heartfelt advocacy ... was reserved for the novel" (Castle 447). Thus, the rise of the professional woman writer and that of the novel have something important in common, namely their claim to a respectable status on the literary stage. Arguably, the critical and theoretical efforts made by eighteenth-century women writers to promote the novel's respectability can also be construed as self-legitimising. Therefore, the impact of their work is, in the case of the novel, different from their contribution to other literary forms.

In the eighteenth century, the commentaries on the novel were presented either in the paratext of the novels or in independently published texts, such as reviews, dialogues, pamphlets, or essays. Prefaces, introductory chapters, and dedications were often used for authorial self-explanation, which stresses the critical and theoretical responsibilities that eighteenth-century writers seemed to have implicitly assumed (Nixon 61-62), while the reviews, pamphlets, and essays created the space for the dialogism of the eighteenth-century critical and theoretical discourse. The discourse thus emerging builds upon a set of key aspects: the definition of the novel in relation to other genres and the

establishment of the rules of writing, plausibility as the guiding principle of narrative and character construction, the development of a critical lexicon, compliance with the Horatian dictum that good literature should both instruct and entertain, and the social impact of the novel. The debates fuelled by these aspects can be subsumed under two large preoccupations, ultimately meant to establish the novel as a respectable genre with a legitimate place on the literary stage, namely generic kinship and moral purpose. Women writers contributed valuable insights to both of these theoretical lines of discussions, in some cases even as pioneers.

While the eighteenth-century theoretical approaches to the novel did consider it in relation to other genres, they borrowed most of their substance from the comparison with the romance and the epic. The attempts to define the newly emerging genre through the exploration of generic relationship with the romance started very early, in the last decades of the seventeenth century, when the novel did not even know itself by this name, and continued, arguably in more nuanced manners, throughout the eighteenth. As Ioan Williams explains,

Eighteenth-century criticism of prose fiction in England falls into two sections, dividing at the year 1740. The century began with the rejection of the previously popular heroic romance. The first forty years was a period of great activity and experiment, but was marked by a lack of confidence on the part of novelists and a generally hostile attitude on the part of the critics, who were offended by the frivolity and immorality of such contemporary fiction. This period ended suddenly with the publication of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) and Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742) .... These two writers consolidated their achievement with *Clarissa* (1748) and *Tom Jones* (1749). Together they demonstrated that fiction could be popular and yet have artistic and intellectual appeal. (1)

The new way of writing positioned itself as anti-romance, as a reaction against and rejection of the ideology, techniques, and standards of what was then often referred to as 'the old romance.' The pillars of this distinction are the claim to truth assumed by the emerging genre and the techniques of mimetic achievement it was beginning to develop.

The strategy of withdrawing narratives from the field of fabrication by reinforcing their referential status and representative power was a dominant practice among eighteenth-century writers, and most women

novelists embraced and nuanced it in their writing. It was a strategy meant to establish generic rules and standards, but also to imprint some sense of respectability to the new genre that was seen as lacking legitimacy on the literary stage. As McKeon explains,

The claim that narrated events really happened is of fundamental importance in the early theory of the novel, for it signifies the commitment of the nascent genre to a rigorously empirical model of truth that was distinct (contemporaries believed) from traditional standards of truth-telling. By this way of thinking, the as-yet-unnamed genre might coexist with traditional literary genres like romance and epic, but it was sharply distinguished from them by its strict fidelity to, its immediate representation of the realm of the real. ("Prose Fiction" 241)

Historicity, truthfulness, plausibility, familiarity, and everydayness are the notions that generated the critical lexicon of the eighteenth-century commentaries on the novel, thus defining the new genre in opposition to the idealizing strategies and the extraordinariness of the romance. The claim to truth and historicity<sup>5</sup> started with the titles and subtitles of the prose works that were trying to depart from idealizing and sensational narratives. Many such texts were assigned the mark of authenticity by being labelled with phrases such as 'history,' 'true history,' 'historical novel,' 'secret history,' or 'true relation.'

One of the first writers to rely on the claim to historicity as a means of distinguishing between the improbable plots of romances and the immediate representation of reality is Aphra Behn. Her narrators always begin their stories by vouching for the veracity of their accounts. For instance, in the dedication of *Oroonoko, or, The Royal Slave. A True History* (1688), Behn stresses the truthfulness of her story and distinguishes between her kind of writing and the extraordinary character of the adventures in romances:<sup>6</sup> "If there be anything that seems Romantic, I beseech your Lordship to consider these countries do, in all things, so far differ from ours that they produce unconceivable wonders; at least they appear so to us because new and strange" (5). Behn's proto-novel begins with the same claim to truth; her narrator always specifies the sources of her knowledge of the events and insists on their reliability:

“I do not pretend, in giving you the history of this Royal Slave, to entertain my reader with adventures of a feigned hero, whose life and fortunes fancy may manage at the poet's pleasure; nor in relating the truth, design to adorn it with any accidents but such as arrived in earnest to him ... I was myself an eye-witness to a great part of what you will find here set down ...” (6)

The claim to truth and historicity in narration was embraced by an increasing number of authors as the eighteenth century progressed in Britain, and nuances began to enrich the writers' approaches to truth-claim strategies. The critical discourse has gradually introduced plausibility or verisimilitude as the guiding principle of writing. One of the first writers to subtly expose the semblance of truth as the model for the authorial truth-claim is Penelope Aubin. In the “Preface” to *The Strange Adventures of the Count de Vinevil and his Family* (1721), Aubin writes: “As for the Truth of what this Narrative contains, since *Robinson Crusoe* has been so well receiv'd, which is more improbable, I know no reason why this should be thought a Fiction” (67). The subversive implication of her argument reveals the naïve empiricism of the claim to historicity,<sup>7</sup> while also hinting at the futility of interrogating the truth-value of fiction and already suggesting the kind of aesthetic distance that, a century later, Coleridge will call the “suspension of disbelief.” The techniques of verisimilitude employed by this new kind of writing are thus exposed as relying on a bargain with the reader, who is invited to participate in the recalibration of the epistemology of truth. In this new model, acceptance and plausibility draw ahead of factuality and add nuances to the claim to historicity.

Eliza Haywood, one of the most prolific writers of the eighteenth-century, also tries to persuade her readers of the factuality of her accounts. Her methods are reminiscent of both Behn and Aubin. In the preface to *The Fair Hebrew*, for example, she defends the reliability of the sources she had used for the story, but her views on the subject often reveal more sophisticated insights into the matter. In some cases, Haywood uses verisimilitude as the main criterion for the definition of the novel against the romance. In the preface to the second edition of *The Disguis'd Prince: or, the Beautiful Parisian. A True History* (1733), a work translated from the French, Haywood writes:

Those who undertake to write Romances, are always careful to give a high Extraction to their *Heroes* and *Heroines*; because it is certain we are apt to take greater Interest in the Destiny of a *Prince* than of a *private Person*. . . . As the following Sheets, therefore, contain only real Matters of Fact, and have, indeed, something so very surprising in themselves, that they stand not in need of any Embellishments from Fiction: I shall take my *Heroine* such as I find her, and believe the Reader will easily pass by the Meanness of her Birth, in favour of a thousand other good Qualities she was possess'd of. (87)

In other works Haywood employs the claim to truth as an argument meant to bolster the educational purpose of fiction. The dedication of *Lasselia* (1723), for instance, ends with a reference to the writer-reader pact on the responsibility to contribute to the fulfilment of the moral purpose of the novel. The moral charge of the novel relies on the claim of verisimilitude: "...but where I have had the Misfortune to *fail*, must impute it either to the obstinacy of those I wou'd persuade, or to my own Deficiency in that very Thing which they are pleased to say I too much abound in – a true Description of Nature" (79). Consequently, the writer is seen as bearing the responsibility for perfecting the techniques of representation, but this attempt needs to be complemented by the reader's disposition to accept the semblance of truth.

The principle of plausibility as definitive of the generic relation between the novel and the romance also guides the more mature and informed theoretical commentaries of the last decades of the century. Clara Reeve, for instance, dwells on this distinction in her attempt to establish the standards for the gothic novel, a subcategory that Reeve sees as a crossbreed between a novel and a romance. Although the reliance of the gothic novel on exuberance of imagination is acknowledged, Reeve pleads for the distribution of the resources of literary representation in such a way as to preserve the semblance of truth. Starting from an evaluation of *The Castle of Otranto*, in the preface to *The Old English Baron* (1778) Reeve defines the gothic novel as

an attempt to unite the various merits and graces of the ancient Romance and the Modern novel. To attain this end, there is required sufficient degree of the marvellous, to excite the attention; enough of the manners of

real life, to give an air of probability to the work; and enough of the pathetic, to engage the heart in its behalf. (229)

The attempts to establish the novel's generic kinship were not restricted to evaluating its relationship with the romance. Older generic models were approached and affinities were explored in the attempts to define the novel in such a way as to render it more respectable by linking it to a highly appreciated classical genre. The epic seemed the most suitable candidate for the classical parentage envisaged by the supporters of the new genre and the famous definition of the novel as a "comic Romance" which is but "a comic Epic-Poem in Prose" (3) given by Fielding in his preface to *Joseph Andrews* (1742) has made an enduring career. The association established by Fielding derives from a brief exploration of the techniques of generic composition, meant to outline the conventions of the novel.

The generic association proposed by Fielding in *Joseph Andrews* was embraced by some, but met with suspicion by others. Elizabeth Griffith, for instance, seems impervious to the benefits of such an august lineage. In the preface to *The Delicate Distress* (1769), she makes her disregard clear:

I know not whether the novel, like the *épopée*, has any rules, peculiar to itself – If it has, I may have innocently erred against them all, and drawn upon myself the envenomed rage of that tremendous body, the *minor critics*. ... Sensibility is, in my mind, as necessary, as taste, to intitle to judge of a work, like this; and a cold criticism, formed upon *rules for writing*, can, therefore, be of no manner of use, but to enable the stupid to speak, with a seeming intelligence, of what they neither feel, nor understand. (4-5)

In her rejection of the classical predecessor, Griffith is consistent with the attitude common among women writers, namely the appreciation of individual talent above the writing techniques informed by classical education. As Castle explains, since these women could not benefit from institutionalized instruction and were "untutored in the rules of and prescriptions of classical rhetoric," for them "[t]rue poetic genius ... did not inhere in erudition, or in the slavish concern with correctness, but in a spontaneous overflow of native wit and imagination" (446). The case can

be made that Griffith's rejection draws more energy from the satisfaction of launching a pre-emptive attack against critics. However, her intuition is correct: the novelistic experiments of the previous decades had already proved the genre's unconventionality and potential to subvert and challenge whatever rules the critics might establish. Griffith's attitude is, in some respects, reminiscent of Fielding's position, as expressed in the first chapter of the second book of *Tom Jones* (1749), where he is very categorical in claiming the newness of the genre and the authority of the writer over generic rules: "for as I am, in reality, the founder of a new province of writing, so I am at liberty to make what laws I please therein" (68).

Involved in the discussion of the generic affiliation of the novel, Reeve includes both the romance and the epic. In *The Progress of Romance* (1785), the first extensive study on the generic connections of the novel, through the voice of Euphrasia, Reeve proposes an evolutionary model of literary kinship: "As a country became civilized, their narrations were methodized, and moderated to probability. – From the prose recitals sprung History, – from the war songs Romance and Epic poetry" (14). Her study then follows the relationship between the novel and the romance and advances a set of criteria meant to outline the generic borders.

The word Novel in all languages signifies something new. It was first used to distinguish these works from Romance, though they have lately been confounded together and are frequently mistaken for each other. ... The Romance is an heroic fable, which treats of fabulous persons and things. – The Novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the times in which it is written. The Romance, in lofty and elevated language, describes what never happened nor is likely to happen. The Novel gives a familiar relation of such things as pass every day before our eyes, such as may happen to our friend, or to ourselves; and the perfection of it is to represent every scene in so easy and natural a manner, and to make them appear so probable, as to deceive us into a persuasion (at least while we are reading) that all is real, until we are affected by the joys or distresses of the persons in the story as if they were our own. (110-111)

Reeve's definitions and distinctions are neither new, nor revolutionary; they articulate the main ideas that had informed the theoretical discourse on the novel throughout the eighteenth century. However, her work is not

without merit. *The Progress of Romance* is a valuable and documented history of narrative forms, which also puts forth solid and well-argued critical perspectives. At a time when the novel was a tolerated, rather than a celebrated literary genre, Reeve contributes to the effort of consolidating its place among respectable literary genres. Of particular notice is her plea for a reconfiguration of the critical models of aesthetic assessment, by arguing that aesthetic value is to be found in the works themselves, not in their generic category. “[T]here is a certain degree of respect due to all the works of Genius, by whatever name distinguished,” Reeve argues (25), thus pleading for more flexibility in critical judgement. Her observation obliquely invites the appreciation of individual talent over the hieratic, classically informed practice.

Definitions such as Reeve’s, rendering plausibility, familiarity, and referential discourse as generic lowest common denominators, guided much of the literary criticism of the day. For instance, the standards for a good novel implied by poet and literary critic Elizabeth Moody in her review of *The Denial; or, The Happy Retreat* (1790) rely on a definition derived from the same principles:

The story of a novel should be formed of a variety of interesting incidents; a knowledge of the world, and of mankind, are essential requisites in the writer; the characters should be always natural; the personages should talk, think, and act, as becomes their respective ages, situations, and characters; the sentiments should be moral, chaste, and delicate; the language should be easy, correct, and elegant, free from affectation, and unobscured by pedantry; and the narrative should be as little interrupted as possible by digressions and episodes of every kind. (370)

Indeed, after a century of critical and theoretical debates, the genre seemed much easier to define and the rules of composition much easier to prescribe. Thus, the exploitation of familiar scenarios with the assistance of compelling characters in a well-structured narrative became the standard of novelistic practice. Such definitions became increasingly popular, but even if they seemed to offer solid generic evaluation criteria, the critical discourse they engendered became rather formulaic and repetitive. It emphasized boundaries, rather than potentialities and was therefore too conservative and restrictive for such a protean genre as the

novel – and the proof actually comes from the same century and literary culture.

Besides the exploration of generic kinship, the other strategy of reinforcing the novel's respectability as a literary genre was the defence of its moralizing potential. Both writers and critics were aware of the transformative potential of fiction and, therefore, of the dangers it could pose to the naïve and easily impressionable readers who could now identify with characters and trust the probability of the plot. In order to resist the uncomplimentary and repudiating rhetoric of those who rejected the new kind of writing, the novel had to demonstrate its power to promote virtue and teach moral lessons – which it had already done by mid-century thanks to the work of Richardson and, according to some, Fielding.

In rather self-legitimising efforts, women critics were the most vocal defenders of the moral principle in fiction, sometimes even to the detriment of verisimilitude (Castle 449). In a dialogue that extends the quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns to encompass the novel, Elizabeth Montagu resorts to the novel's instructive capabilities as the sole generic defence. The discussion between Plutarch and a bookseller designed by Montagu in "Dialogue XVIII" from *Dialogues of the Dead* (1760) touches upon important theoretical aspects, such as authorship and authority, the education of aesthetic taste versus the commodification of literature, questions of genre and the impact of books on women, the novel-romance relationship, or the exemplariness of heroes. The bookseller's arguments are immediately deconstructed by Plutarch, and he can only build a case for the novel with arguments derived from its ability to offer models of morality. The examples used by the bookseller are, of course, the works of Richardson and Fielding.

Writers and critics agreed, from the very beginning, that novels should offer both entertainment and moral instruction, but the methods by which this purpose was to be achieved quickly became one of the main subjects of the theoretical controversy. The debate was fuelled by the opposition between the writing techniques of Richardson and Fielding, and it concentrated on the construction of characters. Setting good examples was essential for many, since affective identification was seen

as the guiding force of reading strategies. Seductive characters could bypass the moral imperative and ultimately usurp the reader's sense of moral behaviour. Consequently, careful consideration of character construction and development was recommended by the large majority of critics and writers. In most cases, this vulnerability and impossibility to discern between fiction and reality was attributed to women,<sup>8</sup> which gives even more relevance to the theoretical standpoints expressed by women writers.

The theory of character was polarized between those who supported faultless characters, perfect models of virtue, and those who advocated for mixed characters who would ultimately redeem their vices or whose virtues would prevail over their faults. Women writers participated in the debate on both sides, contributing insightful arguments to the polemic. Sarah Scott, for example, in the preface to *The History of Sir George Ellison* (1766), positions herself against the composition of mixed characters. She supports plausibility and familiarity as the basic principles of fiction since, in her opinion, common people and situations create efficient examples for the reinforcement of moral values and respectable conduct. However, good characters with imperfections might provide excuses that the reader could use for his/ her own misdeeds, which leads Scott to the conclusion that "the faults of good people do more harm than the errors of the less virtuous, and when we would exhibit a character proper for imitation, we should rather endeavour to conceal the failings which may have stolen into a good heart, than industriously seek to discover them" (120). Given the commonly shared belief in the vulnerability of the majority of readers, arguments like Scott's make sense and were often used throughout the century by both men and women writers and critics.

On the other hand, there were also those who supported a more refined pedagogical thesis. They argued that a mixture of good and bad personality traits represents a more accurate representation of human nature and can therefore teach a more effective lesson. For instance, in a letter addressed to Catherine Talbot (1749), Elizabeth Carter defends Tom Jones as a complex and compelling character, whose qualities would most definitely obscure his shortcomings in the eyes of the reader. Carter thus

implies that well-constructed characters should rely on more than exemplarity:

I am sorry to find you so outrageous about Tom Jones; he is no doubt an imperfect, but not a detestable character, with all that honesty, goodnature, and generosity of temper. Though nobody can admire Clarissa more than I do; yet with all our partiality, I am afraid, it must be confessed, that Fielding's book is the most natural representation of what passes in the world, and of the bizarreries which arise from the mixture of good and bad which makes up the composition of most folks. Richardson has no doubt a very hand at painting excellence, but there is a strange awkwardness and extravagance in his vicious characters. (125)

The divergent opinions over characters continued to fuel the critical discourse for decades. At the end of the century, Mary Hays still had to defend her character construction strategies with similar arguments, to which she added the key for the lesson in conduct envisaged by her novel. In the Preface to *Memoirs of Emma Courtney* (1796), Hays writes:

It has commonly been the business of fiction to pourtray characters, not as they really exist, but, as, we are told, they ought to be — a sort of *ideal perfection*, in which nature and passion are melted away, and jarring attributes wonderfully combined. In delineating the character of Emma Courtney, I had not in view these fantastic models: I meant to represent her, as a human being, loving virtue while enslaved by passion, liable to the mistakes and weaknesses of our fragile nature. — Let those readers, who feel inclined to judge with severity the extravagance and eccentricity of her conduct, look into their own hearts; and should they there find no record, traced by an accusing spirit, to soften the asperity of their censures — yet, let them bear in mind, that the errors of my heroine were the offspring of sensibility; and that the result of her hazardous experiment is calculated to operate as a *warning*, rather than as an example. (36)

By the last decades of the century, the status of the novel had, indeed, consolidated. Even if it had not reached a position respectable enough to compete with the classical genres, it enjoyed increased critical interest and an ever-growing popularity among readers. The status of the novelist had also changed, even if the writers themselves could not always perceive it. Frances Burney, for instance, begins the preface to *Evelina* (1778) by lamenting that “In the republic of letters, there is no member of such inferior rank, or who is so much disdained by his brethren of the

quill, as the humble Novelist” (7). It is noteworthy that this lament came from the woman writer whose “writing set the standard for novel achievement” in her day (Runge 294). In the same preface she turns to the already traditional arguments, plausibility and educational purpose, as legitimising and, implicitly, self-legitimising strategies. The critical and theoretical discourse on the novel had matured, but it seems that women writers still needed the century-old arguments to tackle their professional insecurities.

The critical climate might have become slightly more welcoming with women, but their situation was still not comfortable. Consequently, some women writers decided to instil political arguments both into their fiction and into their critical or prefatory discourse. Thus, the educational and moralizing purpose of the novel that had been continuously reinforced for more than a century makes room for political advocacy. For instance, in the Preface to *Desmond* (1792), after arguing the relevance of the political discussions in her novel by claiming that they reproduce real-life debates, Charlotte Smith writes:

But women it is said have no business with politics – Why not? – Have they no interest in the scenes that are acting around them, in which they have fathers, brothers, husbands, sons, or friends engaged? – Even in the commonest course of female education they are expected to acquire some knowledge of history; and yet, if they are to have no opinion to what *is* passing, it avails little that they should be informed of what *has passed*, in a world where they are subject to such mental degradation; where they are censured as affecting masculine knowledge if they happen to have any understanding; or despised as insignificant triflers if they have one. (134)

A particularly influential advocate of social, educational, and political reform, Mary Wollstonecraft also used fiction and critical discourse to express her views on the status of women. In the preface to her unfinished novel *Maria: or, The Wrongs of Woman* (1798), Wollstonecraft explains the militant intentions that guided the design of her work: “In many instances I could have made the incidents more dramatic, would I have sacrificed my main object, the desire of exhibiting the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society” (157). Wollstonecraft’s design casts her novel as far

away as possible from the idealisation of romance. It also reveals her dependence on the transformative power of fiction and on the strong effect of representational realism to inculcate her readers with progressive notions of domestic and public gender interaction. Such extensions of the scope of the novel and of the prefatory discourse contribute to emphasizing the generic capacities for political advocacy as well as the self-legitimising efforts of women writers. Writing is also implicitly acknowledged as one of the very few – if not the only – venues available to women for the expression of their views on the world in which they live, but from which they seem to be excluded.

By the end of the century, the novel had benefited from an increasingly sophisticated critical and theoretical discourse, which evolved towards more complex generic explorations, more elaborate critical tools, and more sensible recommendations. Although lacking any kind of programmatic design, the critical and theoretical discourses of eighteenth-century British women writers did contribute to the shaping of the new genre. Their insights and theoretical intuition were either pioneering or, at least, nuancing. The fact that an increasing number of novelists were women and more and more female writers also contributed critical reviews to the best known literary periodicals of the day reflects a slight change in their role in the literary establishment, which was still largely a male enterprise. This is more easily seen retrospectively since, in their day, these women were afforded little credit. However, as literary histories are being revised from less gender-biased positions – a process which started in the 1980s – the contribution of the female writer and critic becomes more visible and reveals its relevance to reconsidering the canon.

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<sup>1</sup> The temporal boundaries of what is meant here by ‘the eighteenth century’ extend to begin with 1688, the year historically marking the Glorious Revolution and, coincidentally, also the year when Aphra Behn published *Oroonoko*. The inclusion of Aphra Behn in the discussion is important since she is one of the first writers to insist on the truthfulness of her narratives as a reaction against the idealising tendencies of the romance, which is a fundamental concern of the eighteenth-century theory of the novel. The phrase was coined by Frank

O’Gorman in *The Long Eighteenth Century: British Political and Social History 1688-1832*. For further information, see either edition of the book (1997, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Margaret Anne Doody’s *The True Story of the Novel* (1996) or Toma Pavel’s *The Lives of the Novel* (2013), first published as *La pensée du roman* (2003).

<sup>3</sup> According to Cheryl L. Nixon, in the eighteenth century, writers produced much critical and theoretical discourse (35-36). The word ‘writer’ will be used throughout this paper, since the women referred to here were writers, most of them novelists.

<sup>4</sup> Such as Jane Spencer’s *The Rise of the Woman Novelist* (1986), Nancy Armstrong’s *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (1987), Ros Ballaster’s *Seductive Forms: Women’s Amatory Fiction from 1684–1740* (1992), or more recent works, such as *Making the Novel: Fiction and Society in Britain, 1660-1789* (2006) by Brean Hammond and Shaun Regan who tell the story of the British novel by considering prose fiction written by both male and female writers.

<sup>5</sup> “Claim to historicity” is the phrase Michael McKeon defines and employs. See “Prose Fiction: Great Britain” 241.

<sup>6</sup> According to Nixon, by using the word ‘Romantick’ (this is the spelling in the anthology edited by Nixon), Behn refers to “the eighteenth-century understanding of ‘romance’ as an exotic, unrealistic adventure tale that features military heroics and amorous exploits” (64, footnotes). The case can be made that *Oroonoko* fits the definition of romance, but the attempt of denying the strategies of idealization employed by romances reveals Behn’s awareness of the potential for new ways of writing.

<sup>7</sup> See M. McKeon’s thesis on the emergence of the modern novel from a shift from romance idealism to naïve empiricism and to extreme skepticism. *The Origins of the English Novel, 1600-1740*, 47-52.

<sup>8</sup> *The Female Quixote* (1752) by Charlotte Lennox is an excellent fictional commentary on this vulnerability associated with female readership.

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