

UC SANTA BARBARA

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Tim Dougherty

SCHOLAR'S BOOK CREDITS FORGOTTEN WOMEN NOVELISTS FOR INVENTING EARLY FORMS OF MEDIA CULTURE

Conventional wisdom holds that the modern English novel was born with the works of Henry Fielding and other 18th-century prose stylists. But in fact popular fiction's beginnings can be traced back decades earlier, to Aphra Behn, Delariviere Manley, and Eliza Haywood, whose influential work was systematically forgotten as part of an early effort to legitimize the genre, says a UC Santa Barbara scholar.

"These popular women novelists were the first to produce formula fiction, something recognizable as akin to detective stories or science fiction that people found delicious and easy to read. But their work was ignored in the campaign to endow the novel with cultural prestige, to make it worthy of study and canonization. In this way universities actually became complicit in erasing literary history," observes William B. Warner, author of the unique new book "Licensing Entertainment: The Elevation of Novel Reading in Britain, 1684-1750" (University of California Press, 1998).

Printing caused a cultural stir in late 17th-century Britain, rapidly creating a massive market for books, especially narratives. Newly inexpensive novels became middle-class commodities.

"People began reading them avidly and habits changed. Instead of buying one book and reading it repeatedly in an intensive way---which was necessary when printed materials were harder to come by---people would read one book, pass it along, and become immediately hungry for another. It was the beginning of media culture as we know it today with the television serial and the film," said Warner.

As it became more popular, however, novel reading produced unease, particularly among cultural elites who associated books with higher forms of knowledge such as law, politics, and religion. For these traditionalists, reading as entertainment was a perversion.

In response, a conscious effort was made to recast the novel as a respectable art form. The short, erotic, plot-driven fiction of 17th-century trailblazers Behn, Manley, and Haywood came to be absorbed and overwritten by the novels of Richardson, DeFoe, and Fielding---who ironically borrowed liberally from the work of their predecessors while banishing them from cultural memory.

"A kind of absorption and erasure took place. The later authors refused to acknowledge a debt to the earlier books while simultaneously drawing on what those books offered in the way of narrative formulas," said Warner, a specialist in 18th-century British literature whose earlier books include "Cultural Institutions of the Novel" (Duke University Press, 1996) and "Reading Clarissa: The Struggles of Interpretation" (Yale University Press, 1979).

According to Warner, the effort to ascribe noble origins to the novel is an early example of the modern anxiety about the effects of new media on consumers, an echo of which can be seen today in the ongoing debate over the value and dangers of the Internet.

"The controversy over the Internet is the latest expression of the old tension between commercial media and the effort to make it elevating in some way. The fundamental argument is, should forms of entertainment be sanctioned for the express purpose of enjoyment or should primary consideration be given to intellectual improvement. In the case of 18-century Britain and the early novel, the conflict between high and low culture and its divergent cultural agendas helped produce the most popular literary form of the last two centuries, the novel," he said.

"Perhaps contemporary struggles over use of the Internet will produce new literary forms for the 21st century."

About UC Santa Barbara

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