

Articles

Eve and Her Daughters in England's Long Eighteenth Century (Essay Review)

LAURA M. STEVENS
University of Tulsa

Women Novelists and the Ethics of Desire, 1684–1814: In the Voice of Our Biblical Mothers, by Elizabeth Kraft. Hampshire, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2008. Pp. viii + 199. \$74.64. ISBN: 9780754662808.

Engendering the Fall: John Milton and Seventeenth-Century Women Writers, by Shannon Miller. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008. Pp. viii + 280. \$65. ISBN: 9780812240863.

Could there have been an archetype more powerful for the women of early modern England and its colonies than Eve? She was everywhere in discussions of what the first epistle of Peter termed “the weaker vessel” (1 Pet. 3:7), while debates over women’s moral and intellectual capacities tended to be waged through discussions of her merits, her flaws, her relationship with Adam, and of course her particular culpability in bringing about humanity’s expulsion from Eden. The notorious *Querelle des Femmes*, or quarrel over women, enlisted classical and English historical figures in a combat of example versus counterexample of female virtues and failings, but nothing surpassed the moral authority of biblical figures, the foremost of whom was Eve. The spiritual diary of Martha Gerrish, a New England Congregationalist memorialized in a funeral sermon of 1740, aptly summarizes the powerful combination of recrimination and consolation that surrounded this figure, especially when she was regarded as a synecdoche for all women: “There is no Affliction, which humbles me so much as the Consideration of the *Woman’s being first in the Transgression*. . . . But eternal Praises be to our merciful God, who . . . came down a few Minutes after the Fall of Man, and raised him up with a *Promise of Salvation, in the Seed of the Woman*.”¹ Whether she was primarily or jointly responsible for the Fall, Eve simultaneously signified, for women like Gerrish as well as for countless men, humanity’s damnation and redemption, its disobedience but also its eventual salvation.

Her position was especially prominent in discussions of marriage. In the conclusion to *A Wedding-Ring Fit for the Finger*, a wedding sermon reprinted several times after its first appearance in 1658, William Secker proclaimed, “Every wife should

1. Martha Gerrish, *The Happiness of a Holy Life, Exemplified in the Sickness and Death of the Pious Mrs. Martha Gerrish, Of Boston in New-England, Who Died April the 14th, 1736. Aetat. 48. With a Collection of Very Pathetick Letters written by Her, during her Languishing Indisposition* (London, 1740), 4–5.

be to her husband, as *Evah* was to *Adam*, a whole World of women; and every husband should be to his wife, as *Adam* was to *Evah*, a whole World of men.”² While the first woman and man of Genesis stood as all-encompassing figures in the arena of marriage, constituting worlds to each other, Eve held a definitional status for women much more powerful than Adam did for men. Along with other women from the Bible, especially the Old Testament, she provided the origin point for a collection of scriptural precedents, even an abbreviated language of character types, for directing female behavior.

Positioning women firmly in the house, Secker cited “One of the Antients” to assert that a woman “must not be a Field-Wife like *Dinah*; nor a Street-Wife, like *Thamar*; nor a Window-Wife, like *Jezabel*.”³ In sermons like this one the catalogue of woman, a genre going back to Hesiod, developed a highly compressed form with entirely scriptural examples delivered not just to assess behavior, but to shape it. In the wedding sermon *A Wife Indeed* (1624), Thomas Gataker warned, “Many a *good David* is matched with a *scoffing Micol*. [2 Sam. 6:20]. Many a *iust and religious Iob*, with a *foolish and unkinde Woman* [Iob. 2:3,10].”⁴ With Eve as their foundation, and with the Virtuous Woman of Proverbs 31 as their unsurpassable ideal, the women of scripture comprised an informal shorthand of moral prescription and proscription, of misogyny and protofeminism, of poetic evocation and even seduction, pervading didactic writings but spilling over into a range of less explicitly religious texts.

To consider a few examples from a wider array of literary references, in Defoe’s *Roxana or The Fortunate Mistress*, the titular character cites biblical precedent when she compels her maid to have sex with her own lover. “Come, my Dear, says I, when *Rachael* put her Handmaid to-Bed to *Jacob*, she took the Children as her own.”⁵ In Samuel Richardson’s *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*, the recently married Lady Harriet Grandison praises her husband upon hearing that he turned down a last-minute dinner invitation so that he would not inconvenience her: “Tenderest of husbands! Kindest and most considerate of men!—He will not subject a woman to the danger of being a refusing *Vashti*; nor yet will give her reason to tremble with a too-meanly mortified *Esther*.”⁶ Decades later and an ocean away in *The Secret History*, a novel of domestic intrigue set against the bloody background of the Haitian Revolution, Leonora Sansay showed a seducer working his wiles through deft reference to both classical mythology and biblical narrative: “[H]e offered her an apple, which she declined accepting. Take it, said he, for on Mount Ida I would have given it to you, and in Eden I would have taken it from you.”⁷ One striking feature of these passages, both male- and female-authored, is the efficiency with which scriptural figures enhance character depiction while supplying rich

2. William Secker, *A Wedding-Ring Fit for the Finger: Or, the Salve of Divinity on the Sore of Humanity. Laid Open in a Sermon at a Wedding in Edmonton* (London, 1658), 31. The English Short Title Catalogue (ESTC) lists twenty-three editions, including a translation into Welsh in 1775.

3. Secker, *A Wedding-Ring Fit for the Finger*, 20–21.

4. Thomas Gataker, *A Good Wife God’s Gift, and A Wife Indeed. Two Marriage Sermons* (London, 1624), 61.

5. Daniel Defoe, *Roxana, The Fortunate Mistress* [1724], ed. John Mullan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 48. Italics in original.

6. Samuel Richardson, *The History of Sir Charles Grandison*, ed. Jocelyn Harris, 3 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 3:379. [Volume 7, Letter 37 in the original].

7. Leonora Sansay, *Secret History; or, The Horrors of St. Domingo and Laura* [1808], ed. Michael J. Drexler (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 2007), 81.

undercurrents of emotional, political, and sexual intensity. Delivered with confidence in the scriptural literacy assumed of even the most remedial readers, these allusions provide a surplus of meaning that exceeds the moralistic import attributed to biblical figures, especially women, in didactic writings from this era. Even as biblical women comprised a language of social control and provided a nexus for debate over female failings and potential, they also subtly expanded the stories that could be told about ordinary women in their own place and time.

Scriptural women clearly were important to how women read, and how they were read, in England's long eighteenth century. These biblical figures and their stories rarely have played a central role, however, in twentieth- and twenty-first century studies of actual women or depictions of them from the eighteenth century. In this way eighteenth-century English studies have lagged behind examinations of women and their writing from the late medieval period through the seventeenth century.⁸ To some degree this is to be expected, for while religion slips into the background of many writings from the Restoration and eighteenth century, with classical allusions upstaging biblical ones, it is a factor that simply cannot be overlooked in the texts that emerge from England's protracted and bloody Reformation. The great exception to this trend of neglect is the vast scholarship that surrounds Milton's Eve in *Paradise Lost*. It is arguably not an exception at all, as this poem stands on contested turf amidst the balkanization of literary periods, owned both by seventeenth- and Restoration/eighteenth-century specialists. But even if one disregards this poem's liminal periodization, it is ironic that a topic of such apparent importance to feminist studies—interpretations of biblical women—would see the bulk of relevant scholarship on it cluster around the work of a male poet.

2008 saw the publication of two books in the field of English literary history that bucked this trend by considering—entirely or in part—how female authors from the long eighteenth century incorporated biblical women into their own writings: Elizabeth Kraft's *Women Novelists and the Ethics of Desire, 1684-1814: In the Voice of Our Biblical Mothers* and Shannon Miller's *Engendering the Fall: John Milton and Seventeenth-Century Women Writers*. These books are quite different in topic and approach, and they are positioned in noticeably different ways in relation to their fields. They also encompass different eras, with one spanning the seventeenth century and the other ranging from the aftermath of the Exclusion Crisis in 1684 to the Napoleonic Wars. They do not form an obvious pairing, but when looked at together, especially from the vantage point of hindsight some ten years later, they are suggestive of the ways in which attention to scriptural narratives centered on women as both inspiration and provocation for early modern writing can open up new veins of historical knowledge and literary insight. Most of all, these two studies compel us to acknowledge how important a place the Bible occupied in the mental landscape of English female authors as they sought to expand the arenas of activity and thought available to women, even in an era during which religion is often described as receding from importance.

* * *

Engendering the Fall fits within the vast corpus of writing on *Paradise Lost*, but its focus is less on Milton than on the “sustained intertextuality” (3) that exists between his writings and those of several female authors throughout the long seventeenth century.

8. See, for example, Christine Peters, *Patterns of Piety: Women, Gender and Religion in Late Medieval and Reformation England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Examining the work of writers including Aemilia Lanyer, Lucy Hutchinson, Margaret Cavendish, Mary Chudleigh, Aphra Behn, and Mary Astell, Miller seeks to develop a “much more multifaceted view of *Paradise Lost* as embedded in gender debates of the seventeenth century” (4). Along the way she shows Milton to be the recipient as well as the origin of literary influence, in an “an ever-widening circle” (6) of texts that “(re)plot the story of the Garden” (2).

The first of the book’s three major sections attends to Milton’s predecessors (some of them actual women, others female personae adopted by unknown authors) Amelia Lanyer, Rachel Speght, Ester Sowernam, and Aemilia Lanyer, whose texts, “Posing specific challenges to the gender ideology of the period, would prompt John Milton to engage aspects of this earlier debate in his account of the Fall” (19). The middle section, which looks at Lady Eleanor Davies, Margaret Cavendish, Lucy Hutchinson, Mary Cary, Anna Trapnel, and Elizabeth Poole, as well as Milton, considers “how quite varied writers negotiated the English Civil War and the consequence of the Stuart Restoration while simultaneously charting distinct flows of influence between writings by women and *Paradise Lost*” (77). The final section focuses on Mary Chudleigh, Mary Astell, and Aphra Behn, “who would have looked back historically onto Milton and his narrative of the Fall,” at a point when “[t]he Milton they were to engage would have been associated with, and in the eyes of many disgraced by, his regicidal republican politics” (171). All three of these writers in the last section, Miller argues compellingly, “deploy[ed] Milton’s own narrative of the first marriage” (172). Even as they did so, however—against the background of John Locke’s famous critique of Robert Filmer’s defense of absolute monarchy, a critique that advanced a Whig understanding of limited monarchy in the wake of the Glorious Revolution through its reading of the first family in Genesis—these women writers did so with the goal of protesting the tyranny inherent in marriage. Their feminist agenda supplanted his republican one, especially for writers with a Tory outlook such as Behn.

The contributions of this book are substantial and multiple. Miller gives much-needed attention to overlooked writers such as Hutchinson, Cavendish, and Chudleigh, even as she deepens our understanding of better-known figures such as Behn. Her close readings of the poems in particular are intricate, patient, and deft, with scrupulous observations of those instances of allusion or assertion when texts are shown to have intersected with each other. Through this attention to detail she follows the winding trails of intertextuality, mapping a century-long pattern of interaction between Milton’s epic poem and an array of female-authored texts. At the same time, most of her literary interpretations are deeply embedded in political history, especially surrounding the English Civil War and its aftermath.

However valuable the book is to women’s literary history and trajectories of literary influence, it also ranges beyond these areas. Most centrally, the project shows Eve to have been a hotly contested figure throughout the century, with vibrant debate surrounding her relationship with her husband and her degree of blame for the Fall. This debate basically entailed a break from the past, especially the Middle Ages, when it was not uncommon for illustrations of Genesis’s third chapter to depict the serpent with the face and breasts of a woman. The treatment of Eve in *Paradise Lost* was far gentler and more complex than in most preceding treatments, but Miller’s book shows that Milton’s portrayal of the first woman and first marriage did not spring fully formed, Athena-like,

from the poet's head. Rather, it was nurtured and shaped by years of dispute, debate, and freewheeling imagining by women and men. When Milton "place[d] into Adam's mouth the argument for women as the last, and thus best, creation" (33), he was echoing both male and female supporters of women in the *Querelle des Femmes* ranging back for at least a century; he also drew upon these debates when he presented Eve defending her actions in Book 9. Miller delivers an especially persuasive argument for the influence of Civil War era prophets, many of them female, on Milton, who "is more like Eve than Adam in his reception of the nightly language of inspiration" (93). She additionally makes a strong case for the influence of Milton's Eve on two late seventeenth-century narratives that do not explicitly mention this figure: Behn's *Love-Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* and Astell's *A Serious Proposal to the Ladies*. The argument in this closing chapter, one of the book's boldest and most satisfying, shows these two authors to be engaging with a long tradition of gender critique focused on Eve through their depictions of women in prelapsarian or garden spaces. Asserting that "Behn's and Astell's texts thus model what I am terming 'biblical subjectivity,' a form of subjectivity that recursively engages the biblical text" (206), Miller gestures to a much wider horizon of Enlightenment-era responsiveness to scriptural narratives and figures than is explicitly demarcated by her study.

Engendering the Fall expands our knowledge of how and why debates over marriage and women—many of them conducted through depictions of Eve—were also, and more dangerously for their authors, about the legitimacy of the state. Because of the early modern dominance of familial analogies of governmental authority in England, in which the monarch's rule over his people was like that of a patriarch over his family, talking about marriage in the seventeenth century never meant just talking about husbands and wives, women and men. Commentaries on this topic were taken and usually intended as a commentary on the state, especially the monarchy. The book's insights into gender debates as they were waged through Eve thus also contribute to our understanding of arguments over the nature and legitimacy of governmental power. Tracing such discussions as they unfolded in print is especially important for the late seventeenth century, which, Miller observes, "has traditionally been understood to be the breaking point between a premodern state and a rationalist, secular subjectivity, the very benchmark of modernity" (16). Showing the political ramifications that embedded debates over Eve and marriage, she also, by implication, shows how many women writers from this era "were allowed a certain latitude to produce distinct types of texts by entering through the biblical story." Although, as Miller notes, "That latitude was simultaneously self-containing," so that "what I have called a 'biblical subjectivity' made a certain kind of female speech possible while aligning women to a story within which existed a powerful, and powerfully gendered, condemnatory impulse" (236), her study shows women in this century voicing opinions on political and theological topics usually marked as the purview of men. Writing about Eve, it turns out, opened avenues for women to write about much more.

* * *

If Miller's book straddles the early boundary of what is traditionally designated as the Enlightenment and, in England, the long eighteenth century, Elizabeth Kraft's *Women Novelists and the Ethics of Desire* is fully situated in this era. The books differ in other striking ways: while Miller follows the path of influence and dialogue as it winds among

male and female authors, Kraft's focus is almost entirely on female literary history (Samuel Richardson provides the only exception). Miller was focused on responses to and debates over one biblical woman, Eve, but Kraft is attentive to a collection of women from the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament: Deborah, Jael, Esther, Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Hagar, Lot's daughters, and the Shulamite woman from the Song of Songs. Their approaches to the Bible and its relationship to Enlightenment-era writings are also quite different, for *Women Novelists and the Ethics of Desire* is not a study of scriptural references as they appeared in novels, nor is it truly focused on eighteenth-century interpretations of the Bible. Kraft explicitly cautions her readers, in fact, that "the following discussion is not meant to argue influence or stand as a source study" (23), but instead is an effort "to bring [women writers] into dialogue with women of the biblical past" (11).

Biblical influence is less the argument itself than the starting point of Kraft's argument, as she is guided by the awareness that "because of the pervasiveness of Christian practice in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the influence of biblical texts at this time was profound, if often unacknowledged" (23). The "unacknowledged" part of this premise is important, for the novels examined in this book rarely mention biblical women at all. Kraft's approach to the Bible within eighteenth-century English literature might be described as an attentiveness to narrative echo and resonance, "see[ing] and, indeed seek[ing], connections between the women writers of the early modern period in England and the women who populate some of the best known narratives of western culture" (1). To shift metaphors, the book does not trade in the hard coin of textual evidence, but instead in the softer currency of narrative resemblance. Often Kraft's method is to place the scriptural and eighteenth-century narratives next to each other, using the ancient writings to draw out overlooked features of the later ones. A reading of Hagar, for example, expelled from Abraham's household to placate Sarah, and then consoled in the desert by an angel, positions Kraft to meditate on the prevalence of female figures in the Romantic era consigned to abandonment by patriarchal structures. Eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century novels emerge as elaborations on archetypes, so that "Hagar is the heroine of the Romantic age, epitomized nowhere so poignantly as in Frances Burney's final novel, *The Wanderer*" (144), while "*The Young Philosopher's* Laura Glenmorris experiences much of Sarah's history and much of Hagar's as well" (137). At the core of Kraft's approach is the tacit acknowledgment that there are no truly new stories, just retellings of old ones.

What binds together these biblical and eighteenth-century narratives is a focus on female desire, for these stories share an inclination to depict women not just as objects of male desire but also as human beings constituted and driven by their own desires. This is, of course, a topic of great relevance for writers ranging from Aphra Behn in the late seventeenth century to Elizabeth Inchbald in the early nineteenth. As Kraft observes, "Much of the literary effort of English women writers of the long eighteenth century in particular was centered on the examination of the power, force, and meaning of sexual desire" (3). This project of interrogating desire binds together the different portrayals of romance, marriage, and sexuality that distinguish early eighteenth-century amorous fiction from sentimental and Romantic-era novels. Explorations of sexual desire also, though, were about much more, being "grounded in the questions and questionings about natural law that were opened up in England by the cataclysmic events of the 1640s" (3).

While she probes the ways in which “women readers were treated to possibilities or at least fantasies of their own centrality” (6–7), developing new expectations, for example, of courtship and marriage, she is also attuned to how these narratives responded to macro-political issues such as the redistribution of power between crown and parliament.

Kraft’s ultimate purpose in exploring this topic is ethical—that is, to consider the ethical force and impact of narrative, especially the ways in which narrative prompts its readers to think about their treatment of and by others. As she writes, “I believe the central concern of all significant narrative is to explore and articulate the ethics of human behavior” (5). In declaring the guiding principle of Emmanuel Levinas, Kraft signals his importance to her project, especially his “discrimination . . . between a desire that is *aroused* by the ever-exterior other and a desire that demands to be *satisfied* by the other through possession and power” (15). She goes to the Bible and to narratives by Aphra Behn, Delarivier Manley, Eliza Haywood, Samuel Richardson, Sarah Fielding, Frances Burney, Charlotte Smith, and Elizabeth Inchbald (Jane Austen is a puzzling absence) in search of exactly how humans are described as wanting ownership of each other versus seeking true connection with each other, how they fulfill or frustrate each other’s desires, and most of all how they treat each other poorly or well. Her focus throughout the text is on “Heterosexual lovers who embody difference biologically,” because they “are in some ways the best representatives of the ethical relationship” (33), in which one human truly recognizes that the other, being radically other, cannot be fully encompassed by one’s own wishes.

After more fully explicating her theory of desire and her approach to eighteenth-century fiction through readings of Sarah and Rebekah, Kraft devotes three chapters to the English progenitors of amorous fiction: Behn, Manley, and Haywood, for whom “in particular the fundamental obstacle to female happiness was the institution of marriage” (33). She finds Behn’s *Love Letters Between a Nobleman and His Sister* operating through “double allusion” to the Song of Songs and the Garden setting of Genesis 2–3 in ways that “sanitize, indeed idealize, the initial impulses between Silvia and Philander” (36) and that draw upon the genre of pastoral in ways that “reverse the ekphrastic impulse of objectification” (38). The story of Jael, who gruesomely murdered Sisera in the Book of Judges, frames readings of Behn’s “History of the Nun,” a story of another female killer, which Kraft presents as “an argument for monarchical stability as opposed to political exigency” (58). The stories of Jael and Rachav, the woman who switched sides as Joshua invaded Jericho, inspire Kraft’s reading of the women of Manley’s *The New Atalantis*, who “exercise a clear sexual agency” (71). The skill displayed by Esther and Zipporah at speaking in and reading subtle or coded communications resonates with the “hieroglyphic” communications that fill Manley’s *Adventures of Rivella* and Haywood’s *Love in Excess*, which “capitalize on secrets and mysteries” (96). In most of these female-authored stories from the first half of the long century “fantasies of female desire are not simply fantasies of sexual appetite or emotional longing. They are also fantasies of power, influence, and political agency” (51).

The book’s chronological midpoint, and the turning point in novelistic depictions of desire, is Samuel Richardson, the century’s “most important creator of narrative centered on women’s experiences” (104). Kraft approaches him through the analogue of Moses, who, “[w]hatever [he] says and does . . . is, in a very real sense, always singing Miriam’s song” (104). Readings of novels by Richardson and Sarah Fielding, inflected by

the stories of Miriam, Zipporah, Eve, and (with a digression to classical sources) Pandora, explore the silencing effect of sentimentalism on the depiction of female desire, especially by women writers. The two closing chapters focus on archetypes and images of victimhood and exile: Hagar, as noted above, along with Lot's wife and daughters, whose stories serve to highlight the harsh justice of God and patriarchy. Through reference to Lot's wife Kraft examines "Elizabeth Inchbald's own pillar of salt, Miss Milner," whose transgressions are "difficult to decipher and whose punishment is likewise cryptically emblematic" (165). In the story of Miss Milner, her Roman Catholic husband, Lord Elmwood, and their daughter Matilda, Kraft sees women longing for mercy and love from a harsh and inscrutable patriarch. She also sees Britain's struggle to come to terms with the alien elements it encompasses, especially Irish Catholics. On the whole Kraft's feminist Levinasian perspective gives her a strong preference for the much bolder depictions of female desire seen in the earlier writings. By contrast, "In the severing of erotic attraction and ethical commitment, late-century moralists and novelists indicate a fissure has occurred in society" (167), with most women silenced and frustrated in the confines of marriage and home, and with others consigned to the even worse fates of abandonment and exile.

Women Novelists and the Ethics of Desire is a creative and compelling project. It calls its readers to consider how the Bible influenced early modern literature in ways beyond the most literal, inspiring the stories novelists chose to tell in an era usually marked as the one in which consciousness broke with a Bible-centered world view. Its readings of both scriptural and eighteenth-century texts are often beautiful, even lyrical, embodying the radical attentiveness called for by Levinas and searching for depths of intertextual resemblance that many other readers would miss. The book also can be confusing in its analysis, however, at times reaching for more than it delivers or suggesting without proving, evoking without demonstrating. Much of this confusion emanates from the nature of the claims Kraft makes about the significance of these texts and their connection through their stories about biblical women.

One of the most difficult aspects of reviewing this book is selecting the terms through which it should be evaluated, a task that in turn entails the challenge of placing this book within the field of literary study in its own era, the 2000-aughts. This was—and to some extent still is—a period of literary analysis characterized on the one hand by the intensive empiricism of archive-driven historical study, print culture, and the beginnings of digital humanities endeavors, and on the other by the theoretical approaches of late New Historicism, cultural studies, postcolonialism, emotion studies, and queer theory. This book is at odds with those approaches and, in that sense, is not of its time.

It would not exactly be accurate to term this book non-historicist, for at moments it is quite closely focused on how contemporaneous events, especially political conflicts, shaped fiction. In a rare point of overlap with Miller's *Engendering the Fall*, Kraft's *Women Novelists and the Ethics of Desire* is concerned with the profound political and social realignment that followed from the English Civil War and then Revolution of 1689, especially as these events pertained to narratives that shaped women's horizons of possibility. "Bound by two periods of revolution, the period 1684–1814 is unique in British history as a period of rethinking, reshaping, and reformulating all categories of human social interaction" (31), Kraft writes, with implied connections between personal and political categories. Often this approach works: Kraft's positioning of Aphra Behn's

story “The History of the Nun” in response to the Stuart dynasty’s dissolution is particularly strong.

Still, the book does not have the deeply empiricist immersion in historical events, archives, print runs, and circulations of texts that characterizes much work from the twenty-first century’s first decade. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but the bridging of historicist concerns with an execution of the argument through Levinas-inspired deep reading is not always complete, so that leaps between the scriptural and eighteenth-century narratives are sometimes confusing. Exactly why Rachav should resonate with Manley’s partisan satire, for example, is not entirely clear, and the connections between *A Simple Story* and British attitudes to the Irish are not presented with enough specificity to be convincing. Occasional mistakes—Queen Anne was not, in fact, “constantly pregnant during the course of her reign” (65), as her last pregnancy in 1700 preceded her coronation—do not invalidate Kraft’s central assertions about these texts, but they do at times fray the edges of the argument’s historical components. That these stories were responding to political events is quite clear; that they resonate subtly but powerfully with biblical narratives also is made clear through her graceful readings. The precise relationship, however, among these three elements—eighteenth-century fiction, eighteenth-century history, and scriptural narratives—could have been charted in more detail, with the significance of this relationship more fully communicated.

The book’s form of historicism (if it is fair to term it that) operates at a macro rather than micro level, being engaged with the general outlines of vast change but less so with the details of biography, legislation, or battle. This is perhaps to be expected, because the study’s focus on the long eighteenth century exists in tension with more synchronic impulses, especially a vision of women’s fiction from this era as fitting within a continuum of female stories and voices from ancient times to the present day. Kraft sees the authors in her book as “the matriarchs of British fiction” (13) and as part of a female tradition of “voices that cannot be silenced for those who wish to hear them” (177). Tensions of course can be productive, but here the simultaneous gesturing towards and away from historical particularity creates some strain.

The book’s approach to chronology, history, and time, especially its closing focus on the present day with the assertion that “the echoes of [biblical women’s] spoken words . . . persist in our culture as evidence that women have always had voice, desire, subjectivity” (177), paradoxically marks it as something of a throwback. Its feminist aspirations evoke the Second Wave more than the Third in their focus on female traditions and voices, and in its immersion in French literary theory (Levinas most of all, but with nods to Irigaray, Derrida, and other postwar Continental philosophers and psychologists). Kraft describes her book as “challeng[ing] some of the received notions regarding the representation of women and desire that have dominated the field of cultural studies for the past few decades” (1). Most of all, she takes issue with Nancy Armstrong’s influential understanding of “eighteenth- and nineteenth-century female protagonists . . . [as] the embodiment of middle-class desire, desire that is not really sexual, but economic and political, sexualized, but neither driven nor satisfied by the longings or needs of the physical body” (8). Kraft is adamant that “Prose narratives by Behn, Manley, and Haywood do not participate in the definition of the bourgeois ideal” (9) and that the explanatory model provided by Armstrong gives short shrift to these three writers in particular.

That a book is at odds with its time is not necessarily a bad thing, for however valuable and compelling a given approach to textual interpretation may be (and Armstrong's approach has powerful explanatory value), critical paradigms are always in danger of becoming moribund through unquestioning application. Kraft's approach calls its reader to contemplate what has been neglected by the most contemporary critical models. She speaks powerfully to how a recent focus on sentimental literature—and especially its articulation of a rising middle class's agenda—has resulted in neglect or mischaracterization of the major female authors who preceded this major shift in aesthetics and mores. She reminds us to understand Behn, Manley, and Haywood in particular as figures who resist a Whig sensibility, and provides an intriguing new way of thinking about the relationship among Richardson, his female subjects, and his female predecessors. In these ways, Kraft's book anticipates some of the more recent work that has emerged on eighteenth-century fiction such as Toni Bowers's foregrounding of Tory sensibilities in stories that revolve around the "collusive resistance" of young women to seducers.⁹ Most of all, she calls us to look below the levels of the literal and the explicit as we read eighteenth-century novels and as we consider the afterlives of scriptural archetypes, especially female ones, in the Enlightenment. *Women Novelists and the Ethics of Desire* is not in keeping with its scholarly era, and there are flaws in the execution of its argument, but there is value in the friction it generates with its own critical moment.

* * *

The minimal overlaps between Miller's and Kraft's books, which are limited to a reading of Behn's *Love Letters* and an attentiveness to the political ramifications of debates over Eve and the first marriage, indicate that there is no single lesson, no one obvious interpretation, to take away from literary responses to biblical woman in the Enlightenment. The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English engagement with the women of scripture was wide-ranging, complicated, and thorough. The Bible continued to drive debates over the roles of women and men, but its portrayals of women also impelled discussion in areas apparently removed from considerations of gender. Some work touching on this topic has appeared in the interceding years, but many aspects of it remain to be examined.¹⁰ To name just a few, the response to New Testament women, representations of difficult biblical women who challenged the norms of didactic literature, the relationship between textual and visual representations, the placement of female scriptural figures in the Book of Common Prayer, all merit further study and promise to yield important insights into eighteenth-century literature and culture.

Recent years have seen some correction of the longstanding neglect that religious writings, especially commentaries on and retellings of the Bible, have suffered in studies

9. Toni Bowers, *Force or Fraud: British Seduction Stories and the Problem of Resistance, 1660–1760* (Oxford University Press, 2011).

10. Recent publications on this topic include: Saba Bahar, *Mary Wollstonecraft's Social and Aesthetic Philosophy: "An Eve to Please Me"* (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave, 2002); Michael Austin, "Bunyan's Book of Ruth: The Typological Structure of the Seventeenth-Century Debate on Women in the Church," in *Religion in the Age of Reason: A Transatlantic Study of the Long Eighteenth Century*, ed. Kathryn Duncan (New York: AMS, 2009), 83–96; John Morillo, "Editing Eve: Rewriting the Fall in Austen's *Persuasion* and Inchbald's *A Simple Story*," *Eighteenth-Century Fiction* 23, no. 1 (Fall 2010): 195–223; Kathryn L. Steele, "Hester Mulso Chapone and the Problem of the Individual Reader," *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation* 53, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 473–91.

of England's long eighteenth century. In 2007 Jonathan Sheehan's *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* laid to rest any claim that the Bible's importance diminished in England and Germany, as vibrant, substantive traditions of scriptural interpretation developed in these countries. Sermons in particular are receiving much more attention than they did even a decade ago, thanks largely to the publication of *The Oxford Handbook of the Early Modern Sermon* (2011) and *The Oxford Handbook of the Modern British Sermon, 1689–1901* (2012). Didactic literature, both religiously oriented and not, has occasioned a good deal of interest, and the Methodists have received attention in studies such as Misty Gale Anderson's *Imagining Methodism in Eighteenth-Century Britain: Enthusiasm, Belief, and the Borders of the Self* (2012). The more widespread availability of texts that fall outside the usual literary canon through *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online* and through Pickering and Chatto's amply annotated anthologies of overlooked works also has done much to bring religious texts to the attention of more readers. Eighteenth-century English literature scholars are developing a more richly detailed and nuanced understanding of this century, integrating our longstanding view of this era of Enlightenment with an awareness of the many ways in which religious texts, traditions, and controversies continued to operate powerfully in the consciousness of both commoners and elite.

One especially exciting development over the past few years has been the intersection of feminist scholarship with work on religious texts and traditions in the British Enlightenment. To be sure, it is not as though work bringing a feminist awareness to religious literature and history in the eighteenth century is new, but the turn of the millennium has brought about an unprecedented flourishing of studies at this particular crossroads. Seventeenth-century scholarship arguably has led eighteenth-century studies in this area, especially with work on Civil War and Interregnum-era female prophets and religious radicals like Margaret Fell and Anna Trapnell. In eighteenth-century studies female authors who wrote from a religious perspective, such as Mary Astell and Anna Letitia Barbauld, have emerged from obscurity, with fuller attention paid to how their understandings of Christianity and the Bible informed their attitudes to gender. Scholars such as Susan Staves have illuminated the role of women in the Church of England as well as the intersections between theological and political debate as they related to women's treatment and rights.¹¹ That religious influences ranged well beyond orthodox Anglicanism in informing some women's contributions to the Enlightenment has been made clear by Sarah Hutton's excellent study of Anne Conway.¹²

Much more work has been done than can be cited here, but these selected references should make clear how rich a conversation has been developing over the past eighteen years around the place of women and religion together in the British Enlightenment. As subjects of theological debate women (whether fictional or actual) advanced philosophical inquiry; conversely, as writers, many women in this era drew upon theology and scripture to defend women from misogynist attack, to proclaim their rights, and to articulate their desires. It is increasingly clear that interrogations of women and religion together comprised crucial elements in the development of Enlightenment literature and thought. There is still a great deal to be learned about how the Bible

11. Susan Staves, "Women and the Clergy of the Church of England," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 65, no. 1–2 (2002): 81–200.

12. Sarah Hutton, *Anne Conway: Woman Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

influenced the lives of and attitudes to women in this era, especially as those lives and attitudes affected intellectual and political debate. *Women Novelists and the Ethics of Desire, 1684–1814: In the Voice of Our Biblical Mothers* and *Engendering the Fall: John Milton and Seventeenth-Century Women Writers* constitute important contributions to the expansion and refinement of knowledge on this topic. Hopefully these two books, accomplishments in their own right, will provide the building blocks for more such work in the future.