Rewriting History: Six Feminist Perspectives

This week, we present a short list of six 18th and 19th century books in which women rewrite history from a feminist perspective – and encourage readers to re-frame how they experience and view power structures of the past and present in order to change the future.

Peruse, and reach out if there is something that is a complement to your collection – we are always happy to work on terms that fit libraries’ fiscal year needs, and are particularly flexible on invoicing and shipping given the closures affecting some acquisitions departments. In the event that you have specific collecting goals and would like to discuss them with us, we invite you to reach out via phone or email Tuesday-Saturday when our liaison to institutional clientele is on site.

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For inquiries and orders, please contact Miranda directly:

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1. **Balfour, Clara Lucas.**
*Moral Heroism; or, The Trials and Triumphs of the Great and Good.*

London: Houlston and Stoneman, 1846. First edition. Original publisher's cloth embossed in gilt and blind. Yellow endpapers. Corners gently bumped and rubbed; some chipping to spine ends and splits to cloth along both joints, with binding firm. Later bookplate of J.J. Barker to front pastedown and contemporary gift inscription to front endpaper. Occasional inoffensive marginal foxing and pencil annotations; some edges roughly cut, with no loss to text. Collating complete: iv, 368. An assertively feminist perspective on history and leadership, and the first book by activist Clara Balfour, it is scarce institutionally and in trade. While OCLC reports only two copies, none appear in the modern auction record and there are no other first editions on the market.

An educator, philanthropist, and women's rights campaigner, Clara Lucas Balfour added author to her list of honoraries with the publication of this work. Moral Heroism initiated a career that would include "more than sixty publications, many of which went through multiple editions" and her "biographical works about women give her significance in the development of women's literary history. In writing and lecturing on the achievements of women, particularly writers, she stressed the importance of women's education" (Orlando Project). She also emphasized the failings of patriarchal systems of governance, encouraging all readers to imagine a world that privileged moral heroism over military might and which turned to women as models for a new form of leadership. Opening with a dialogue among a mother and children having recently visited a cathedral, the book shows two young boys intuiting from sculptures and art that heroism and glory are linked to conquering and dominance, and that these are the realms of men. Dissatisfied with their assumptions, the mother sits her sons down to confront the inherent problems of this approach to the world; the questions she raises initiate the remainder of Balfour's book, which was written logically and "with a purpose" (Culley). Chapter by chapter she points to historical and contemporary figures across classes who are taking moral leadership, fostering improvements in the world by alleviating poverty, supporting education, and advancing the sciences. And she considers the contributions of women as exemplars of these efforts in daily life. Ultimately, these are the qualities on which a new system can be based.

(4653) $1,250
A woman’s perspective on how revolutionary violence affects men and women, local and international communities

A Sketch of Modern France in a Series of Letters to a Lady of Fashion, Written in the Years 1796 and 1797...

London: T. Cadell Jun. and W. Davies, 1798. First edition. Bound to style in modern half calf over modern boards, with morocco and gilt label to spine. Renewed endpapers. Measuring 210 x 125mm. Collating viii, 518, [2]: complete, including final leaf of adverts. Small paper flaw to margin of 509-510 not affecting text and faint dampstain to upper margin of preliminaries, else a pleasing and clean copy internally. ESCT reports 15 libraries with copies (8 of those in the U.S.), and it does not appear in the modern auction record. Currently this is the only copy on the market.

Notable for being an eyewitness account of Revolutionary France from the perspective of a woman, at a time when "British travellers to Paris were steeped in the highly emotional culture of sensibility...in pursuit of the picturesque" (Thompson). While Louise Elisa Beaumont had an interest in the beauty of French urban culture, the principle focus of her work was how the French people, their cultural institutions, and their city landscapes were being reshaped by "an earthquake on society." An educated Englishwoman married to a Swiss author and illustrator, Beaumont kept a keen eye on how shifts in political thought affected art and antique markets -- and what these shifts implied about the violence and changing lifestyles that the French would be confronting long-term. As she and her husband traveled the Continent to relocate to his native country, Beaumont reported what she saw to a female friend in a series of 31 letters that became the basis for this book. Because the British upper classes had been frequent travelers to France prior to the Revolution, an account like Beaumont's could strike a deep chord, presenting to them a very different picture of the places that had for much of their lives been familiar. "My sensations on entering this capital of the French Republic I can but feebly describe...It is a new Paris...I could not but reflect that, which French delicacy and sentiment objected to the representation of murder in their tragical dramas, in the real tragedy of the revolution they have not manifested the least reluctance at seeing torrents of blood flow..." She reports on the blood stained Tuileries Palace, and the rapid changes happening at the Luxembourg. And she recounts how Austrian prisoners of war are being held in Dijon.

Yet she also draws attention to how these social shifts, how wartime violence, affects women's lives. In Paris, while some women surge the streets hawking political pamphlets and war trophies, the nuns of St. Vincent, "young and handsome had totally given themselves to the care of attending the sick and the indigent." The sisters, though "the revolution had annihilated them as an order and deprived them of their possessions" turn their energies to assisting those so often affected by but forgotten in conflict. And outside the city, "the females of Breteuil, who, like the generality of their sex, when once irritated are not soon appeased" decide to respond to the occupation of their church by soldiers. To this end, they "sallied forth one fine morning, completely armed with female weapons such as spits brooks, sticks, and brickbats [to assail] the principal church door...In they rushed, and without further ceremony turned out those who were in it."
‘I have at heart the happiness of my sex, and their advancement in the grand scale of rational and social existence...’

3. Hays, Mary.
Female Biography; or, Memoirs of Illustrious and Celebrated Women of All Ages and Countries (in 6 vols.).

London: Richard Philips, 1803. First edition. Half morocco over marbled boards with gilt to spines. All edges speckled blue. Measuring 175 x 95mm and collating complete: xxvi, 238, *169-*238, 239-316; [2], 404, [1, blank]; [2], 444; [2], 504; [2], 527, [1, blank]; [2], 476, [4, adverts]. Externally a pleasing, square set with a bit of chipping to the morocco along the lower joints of volumes I-IV not affecting soundness, and some scuffing along the spines. Internally a surprisingly fresh copy with minimal foxing and several contemporary pen annotations not affecting text. Contemporary ownership notation from Ballygarth House (Ireland) to header of opening chapters in volumes II and VI; later ownership stamp of Lt. Col. Pepper to front pastedowns of all volumes. An important feminist work and a scarce text, which OCLC locates complete in only three institutions.

Inspired by Mary Wollstonecraft’s Vindication of the Rights of Woman, Mary Hays determined to write a history of women more diverse than the popular depictions of femininity. Female Biography therefore cuts a wide swath through history, educating readers on the cultural impact women have had on politics, education, art, and literature so that they may escape narrow definitions of submissive womanhood. “My pen has been taken up in the cause, and for the benefit of my own sex...to excite a worthier emulation, the following memorial of those women whose endowments or whose conduct have reflected lustre upon the sex is presented more especially to the rising generation who have not grown old in folly, whose hearts have not been seared by fashion...Every character has been judged upon its own principles.” In the volumes that follow, Hays presents the lives of women from Zenobia and Cleopatra, to Elizabeth I and Mary of Scotland, to Sor Juana de la Cruz, to Margaret Cavendish and Anne Clifford with honesty and the goal of having her girl readers form their own judgments on what qualities add luster to their sex.

Very Good. (4870) $4,250
Famed historical courtesans and their political sway draw attention to the power of the thriving contemporary sex trade

4. La Roche-Guilhem, Anne de.
The History of Female Favourites...

London: Printed for C. Parker, 1772. First English language edition. Contemporary mottled calf with morocco and gilt to spine. Marbled endpapers. Measuring 217 x 127mm and collating complete: [4], 324. Light shelfwear to spine ends and corners; front joint cracked but sound. A firm, square copy that is internally fresh and unmarked. A scarce work by a woman documenting the lives of historic courtesans, it has appeared only twice at auction in the past 85 years and ESTC reports only 13 institutionally held copies (3 of these in the U.S.).

Anne de La Roche-Guilhem's history of famed courtesans was published in four languages between its 1675 release in French and its first appearance in English in 1772 (OCLC). That year, both The Critical Review and the London Magazine noted its potential interest to "those who are fond of of what is known by the name of secret history" and claimed somewhat dismissively that "the ladies will find themselves particularly amused." Female Favourites certainly participated in a popular genre aimed at women -- among its contemporaries were Thomas Amories' Lives of Several Ladies of Great Britain (1755), Thomas Gibbons' Memoirs of Eminently Pious Women (1777), and Ann Thicknesse's Sketches of the Lives and Writings of the Ladies of France (1778). Yet it stood out for avoiding the emphasis on women as exemplars, heroes, or artists to instead focus on the histories and lives of courtesans.

Politics, sex, and economics intertwine in La Roche-Guilhem's narratives which are part fact and part fiction. Female Favourites takes up the stories of courtesans a safe historical distance from the author's own lifetime: Mary de Padilla, Livia, Julia Farnessa, Agnes Boreau, and Nantilda each served kings, emperors, and popes. Their roles were notably more than sexual and physical, however. Though Female Favourites gestures to the weakness and hypocrisy of men in leadership, it equally calls out the power and influence these women could wield not only over their lovers but over their lovers' realms. Tyrants could be advised toward more generous social policies and royal gene pools could be reshaped by genealogical lines outside those sanctioned by the crown -- in the case of Mary de Padilla and King Pedro of Castile, for example. "Mary of Padilla was too much bias'd by interest to neglect such a conquest, and her engaging airs, apt to ensnare, did so enslave a man strong in nothing but crimes that soon she saw herself an absolute sovereign." Encouraging readers to see the more complex roles played by courtesans of the past, Female Favourites also connected these ideas to the thriving sex trade of the present. After all, though ministers and politicians decried so-called bawds and prostitutes, the women and queer people of Covent Garden in London were in their heyday running powerful businesses, generating wealth and even, as this book suggests, enjoying political sway.

ESTC T60642. (4950)  $3,500
A young French woman learns the history of England by copying out an emblem book, emigrating soon after to become a teacher in the UK

5. Leroux, Cécile.

St. Sulpice: 1830. Contemporary roan ruled in gilt with title stamped to spine, measuring 145 x 110mm and comprised of 85 manuscript pages. Spreads of hand-drawn illustrations to versos facing autograph text in English on rectos alternated with blank spreads. Loosely inserted manuscript leaf at front. Copied from Mary Ann Rundall's Symbolic Illustrations of the History of England (London, 1815), the present work is beautifully executed and showcases a young woman's talent and interest in British and European history, sparked in large part by the publication of another woman.

Cécile Josephine Leroux (b. 1806) was born in France and emigrated to Kent at an unknown age; UK paris records show that she married Charles Roffe in 1834 before being widowed and taking work as a French teacher and boarding school principal in Berkshire. Leading into her adulthood, she created this lovely copy of the historic emblems and symbols of England. Her illustrations are incredibly precise and her calligraphy beautiful and legible. At the front of her book, she has loosely inserted a copied quotation from the May 7, 1837 Weekly Dispatch regarding Anglicans and Catholics in the UK along with commentary about the unreliability of the research. Given that the ownership inscription at the front notes that it was completed in January at St. Sulpice, it is likely that the piece predates her relocation and may have been done as a school or training exercise.

The illustrations and text originated from the work of Mary Ann Rundall, "an educational writer who kept a school for young ladies at Bath known as the Percy House Seminary...Miss Rundall's chief work was Symbolic Illustrations, a quarto volume with engravings...designed to instruct young persons in history by a means of a system of mnemonics" (DNB).

Marriage Bans of Kent, England. England and Scotland Census 1871, 1881. (5447) $1,650
A new, activist form of history that encouraged women not to focus on individual figures of the past but on systemically oppressed communities

The History of England...in a Series of Letters to a Young Lady at School (in 3 vols.).

London: Richard Philips, 1806. First edition. Contemporary tree calf with gilt and morocco to spines. All edges speckled brown. A pleasing, square set measuring 173 x 100mm and collating complete with half titles to all volumes and some irregular pagination: [2], vi, 408; [2], xii, 424; xvi, 414, 6. Some wear to spine ends of volumes II and III; joints cracked but holding firmly on volume II. Light toning and scattered foxing throughout, most noticeably in volume II. Closed tear to pages 363-64 of volume I with no loss to text; rear endpaper neatly excised from volume I. Paper flaw to lower corner of pages 357-58 of volume II with no loss to text. In all, a pleasing, unsophisticated copy in a contemporary binding. A scarce work, OCLC records only 10 institutionally held copies (of these, 6 in the U.S.) and the modern auction record shows only one appearance in 1981. It is currently the only copy on the market.

In her own time, Charlotte Turner Smith’s work gained the attention of fellow novelists including Sir Walter Scott and Jane Austen; and it earned her the praise of Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Anna Laetitia Barbauld for its "pioneering sustained natural descriptions in novels" (Poetical Works). Prolific in poetry and prose, Smith wrote not for pleasure but to support her children and herself. "Born into landed gentry, a life of comfort and affluence…she thrived with avid reading, tutoring in landscape painting, dancing, acting, mathematics, and French – all resources on which she would come to rely in adult life" (Sodeman). Womanhood came early for her, as her father married her at 16 to a man whose fiscal irresponsibility and philandering led her into penury. Having, in her own words, been "sold a legal prostitute in my early youth to a monster," Smith used the pen and her social connections to stay afloat by writing popular sentimental and gothic novels. Yet as the century neared its end, her frankness about social issues -- including abolition, child mortality, and the dangers of coverture -- led to a decline in her popularity. "She began to find her most rewarding new readership in children, by publishing four works for them" (ODNB).

The present History of England was designed for young women readers who, though intelligent, might not find themselves drawn to existing history tracts marketed as too dry or complex for them. To correct this, Smith engaged women through an epistolary form made popular through the novel while striving to "contain the excesses of sentiment so often associated with the traditionally female modes of writing…in order to produce a more active, public model of political agency" (Kucich). In this sense, toward the end of her career Smith participated in a new educational movement for women -- one that "transformed exemplary and instructive historical frameworks into a new affective historicism…extending beyond individual character portraits and into activist considerations of systemically oppressed groups such as Jews, the Irish, enslaved people, and indigenous people" (Kucich).

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