



History, Gender, and Eighteenth-Century Literature

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At once feminist and historical, the essays in "History, Gender, and Eighteenth-Century Literature" draw on culture, history and gender as categories of analysis to explore British literature. From a variety of critical angles, the contributors to this volume contend that a comprehensive understanding of the circumstances and conditions of women's and men's lives is vital to the task of literary criticism. The texts under consideration range from the late 17th to the early 19th centuries, from popular and subliterate genres, such as conduct books and agricultural manuals, to works by such canonical writers as Joseph Addison, Richard Steele, Henry Fielding, Frances Burney, and Jane Austen. Providing models that will encourage feminists to turn to history and culture in their analyses of literary texts, these essays explore the culture and historical specificity of ideas about women and men, their roles, and their "nature" as manifested in literature. Among the topics discussed, are the ways in which texts create gendered subjectivities and promote the production of masculine and feminine spheres of activity; the use of more traditional historical methods aimed at rediscovering women's lived experience; the economic and political forces that shape women's lives; the legal foundations of women's powerlessness; the representation of the body; and violations of gender categories. A central tenet of feminist criticism in recent years has been the conviction that gender must be understood, not just in biological terms, but also in its fuller sense as a social and cultural construct. This assumption leads to the awareness that the conditions shaping women's experience - and the construction of gender - are constantly shifting. It is this challenge that the essays in "History, Gender, and Eighteenth-Century Literature" explore. "We must recognize historical difference," writes Beth Fowkes Tobin, "because with this understanding will come the recognition that as women, as writers, and as readers, we are constituted by our society, and upon this recognition depends our liberation."

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