# Narrating Women's History in Britain, 1770-1902 (review)

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Miriam Elizabeth Burstein, *Narrating Women's History in Britain, 1770-1902* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2004), vii + 220 pages, hardback, £42.50 (ISBN 0 7546 3663 1).

In *Narrating Women's History in Britain, 1770-1902*, Miriam Burstein sets out to correct the standard assumption that the task of scholars of women's history is to explain and compensate for its absence from conventional historiography. Though this assumption has prompted important recuperative work, particularly on women writers, Burstein argues that 'it has negatively affected the history of women's history *per se*' by narrowing it according to modern preoccupations, particularly feminist ones (3). According to Burstein, an accurate assessment of women's history during the long nineteenth century must account not for its absence, but for its pervasive presence: during this period, women's history was widespread and mainstream enough to prompt questions about its appeal, rather than its invisibility or marginalization. 'Why', Burstein proposes we should be asking, 'was the history of women so useful in popular historical thought?' (2).

Burstein's own answer is that women's history was one way of telling more general stories, particularly about modernization and progress. Not only could historians explain and illustrate the movement of their society towards modernity through the stories they told about women, but they could prove their most important thesis (that society *had* advanced, that modernity had arrived) by the fact of their narrating women's history at all. Thus in Enlightenment histories, for instance, writing about women proved the historian's participation in civil society; in Victorian histories, writing about women proved the triumph of Christian principles which placed female virtues at the heart of progress. Women's history was 'useful', then, less because it provided information about women across time than because it allowed historians to 'conceptualize their own practice' (49) and to intervene in their culture by offering both explanatory and exemplary narratives.

Burstein is particularly interested in two key concepts she argues underlie historiography in her period. The first, which she calls 'uneventfulness', is the idea that the really important elements of history are private experiences, rather than the public, political, or military events that are conventionally considered 'historical.' There are many paradoxes associated with this 'quest for an uneventful history' (11), including its logical conclusion according to which subjects are most historical when they have become completely invisible: 'how, exactly', Burstein rightly queries, 'does one *write* such a [history]?' (11, original emphasis). Further, as she develops most fully

in her Epilogue, the idealization of the disappearing woman runs in difficult counterpoint to the growing emphasis on women's visibility in public history, which becomes the major historiographical focus of both feminist and anti-feminist writers, especially in the late nineteenth century.

The emphasis on 'uneventfulness' is also in a paradoxical relationship with the other key concept Burstein emphasizes, which she calls 'soft constructionism' – the acknowledgement and sometimes the insistence that nurture as well as nature plays a role in female identity. This conceptual shift, which Burstein argues was a 'genuine innovation' in historical thinking in the late eighteenth century (14), historicizes gender and thus allows for the crucial possibility that 'ideas about gender may become anachronistic' (13). But the trajectory of 'uneventfulness' is towards an ideal and universal gender identity – an exemplary femininity; it is a historical theory that assumes the ahistoricity of (female) gender. Much of Burstein's analysis traces the tensions that emerge between these universalizing and historicizing impulses.

Burstein's contribution to contemporary scholarship on women's history, then, is to open up our thinking about the place and function of women's history over this period, and in particular its key role in defining and reacting to different narratives of modernization. She spells out the implications of her insights in three chapters that combine generalizations about narratives of women's history with close reading of particular historical texts. Her own narrative is organized chronologically and leads us towards the development of 'a truly modern historiography' (15), characterized by 'a history in which gender and society act and react upon each other' (14). The story she tells is not one of steady advancement to this goal, however. Rather, her chapters explore the rise and fall, and complex interaction, of different theories about gender and history. Her first chapter focuses on the emergence of 'soft constructionism' in Enlightenment historiography and on the significance historians of this period placed on treating women historically: because generic forms are associated with different stages of society, the movement of historical narration away from romance becomes a sign of social progress and modernity. But Burstein's second chapter explores the challenges posed to this historicization of gender by the renewed investment in universal, essential femininity between 1789 and 1810, when female influence is seen as an important source of benevolent influence. Though early versions of this theory allowed for sexual influence as a precursor to moral influence, later models seek a more 'disembodied influence' (56). By this standard, a woman's presence is detected only through the diffused effects

of her presence: ideally, the woman herself disappears.

Burstein's fourth chapter examines Victorian variations on this ideal of the disappearing woman, but here her emphasis is on the importance of Christian principles, a feature she rightly protests has been overlooked by other scholarship in this area. By Christian standards, Burstein explains, social and historical progress is measured by the advance of Christianity, and women's position with the state becomes a key index of that advance. Burstein points out that because of their Christian orientation, many Victorian writers understood their responsibilities to women's history quite differently than today's women's historians: far from aiming for inclusiveness, they saw 'pagan' and 'barbaric' women as irrelevant to their stories, and resisted on principle paying attention to women whose eventful public lives took them into the sphere of profane history. Those who told the stories of 'women of public note' were 'succumb[ing] to an unworthy desire for the anomalous' (118). The truly Christian woman lives a life 'too uneventful to warrant narration' (117); as with the disembodied women of Chapter 2, the exemplary historical woman is invisible, her life untold and untellable. Burstein discusses the tensions that arise between this theoretical disappearance of women from history and the very visible Queen Victoria, as well as the increasingly voluble feminist movement.

These elements of Burstein's book belong to a coherent project, and she makes her argument with convincing detail, if in somewhat deadening prose. Though many of her specific topics and examples are not new, by turning us away from the conventional and, she suggests, ideologically motivated assumption that women's history was a fringe field, Burstein provides new interpretive frameworks for them. However, she never clarifies the relationship of the book's three other chapters, each focusing on a particular nineteenth-century novel, to her overall thesis. In each case Burstein offers a detailed reading invoking many of the themes and terms of her discussion of women's history (especially anachronism, progress, universality, and exemplarity), but none of these novels is really an example of 'narrating women's history', and Burstein does not frame her 'literary' chapters with any explanation of how they help to answer her opening question ('Why was the history of women so useful in popular historical thought?'). No doubt wisely, she does not attempt to extend her arguments about the local implications of her examples to claims about their authors, or about 'the novel' in historical discourse. But we are left not knowing why, for example, *Bride of Lammermoor* is important to her but *Waverley* is not, although *Waverley* is at least as interested in historical narration as *Bride*, and arguably more self-conscious about it; or why she writes at length

about *Deronda* but not about *Romola* or *Middlemarch*, when *Romola* overtly tells a story about a woman in history and *Middlemarch* offers one of the century's most thoughtful investigations of the relationship between women and history. These chapters are rich with insights into their central texts, and they illustrate the pervasive significance of Burstein's key concepts in the literature of this period, but she does not make a clear case for their theoretical or argumentative necessity.

Burstein's failure to make this case – or to include any extended discussion of the generic relationship between these fictional examples and other kinds of historical writing – is in one sense explicable given the case she makes in her introduction against assuming rigid genre distinctions in historical writing across her period. In making this now fairly familiar gesture towards blurring the boundaries, she may have felt she obviated the need to consider the difference genre might make: it's all just 'narrating', after all, in one form or another, a recognition which has proved extremely fruitful for historiography at least since the contributions of metahistorians and philosophers of history such as Hayden White and Louis O. Mink. But this collapse of the distinctions between different literary forms comes with some costs of its own – in Burstein's case, some missed opportunities to integrate various strands of her inquiry. In the context she establishes, surely the question of genre is not one of purely internal interest, as it is in her analysis of the contest between the historical and the gothic in Scott. A question she might have asked is whether there are things you can do in fiction that you cannot do in history 'proper' – are there particular ways fiction is 'useful'? Given the tension Burstein demonstrates between the idealization of women's invisibility and the drive for exemplarity, between making women's history known and, in the process, undoing its ideals, she might have come back to her own offhand question about 'uneventfulness': 'How exactly does one *write* such a history?' If the perfect woman is absent from the historical record, where else can she have a narrative home except in fiction, where the lack of documentation need be no obstacle, and the exposure need not threaten either her exemplarity or the truth of its telling? Fiction is perhaps the only historical form within which a heroine can retain her femininity while entering the public record: she can be at once imaginary and ideally historical.

These paradoxical possibilities do not contradict Burstein's arguments, and indeed at times are implicit in them. But fully exploring the implications of genre difference for her larger thesis might have helped Burstein integrate her two kinds of chapters. It's also tempting to consider what else might have come out had she followed this line of

argument about, say, *Middlemarch*. The ending of *Middlemarch*, even more than the ending of *Daniel Deronda*, has attracted the ire of feminist scholars who want to see from one of the nineteenth-century's most conspicuous women a historical narrative generalizing women's emergence into the public sphere – the kind of protofeminist story Burstein argues comes into competition with stories of 'uneventfulness' but which is emphatically not the story of Dorothea Brooke. This dissatisfaction proves Burstein's point that our interpretive frameworks are shaped by our own present attitudes, including our prejudice in favour of a certain narrative of women's history. By contrast, Burstein's approach clarifies a nineteenth-century context in which Dorothea's story must be read as far more triumphant than her author's: she exemplifies the great disappearing woman of history, and as she never really existed, that the story of her 'unhistoric' life can be widely known does not compromise her virtue or her exemplary status. But what is Eliot, a famous nonbeliever, doing with (or to) this supposedly Christian model? Further, given the novel's prominent position in today's pantheon of Victorian novels, what about its narrative of women's history has been so attractive to both critical and popular thought for so long, when the officially 'historical' texts Burstein examines are almost universally obscure? Such questions about the varying uses, both then and now, of different genres of women's history deserve more self-conscious reflection than they get in Burstein's book. Historiography has become a richly interdisciplinary field, but its interest in the literary and political properties of historical writing needs to be balanced by more deliberate inquiry into the unique contributions overtly literary genres may make to narrating history.

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