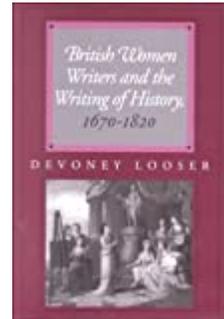




**Devoney Looser.** *British Women Writers and the Writing of History, 1670-1820.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000. xi + 271 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-6448-3.



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## The Genres of Herstory

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Devoney Looser's new book examines six British women writers during the long eighteenth century, starting with Lucy Hutchinson and concluding with Jane Austen. Her interest lies in their various approaches to history writing. She asserts that feminists who bewail the lack of a "herstory," written by women in the early modern era, have been looking far too narrowly. History writing was never a male preserve. But more importantly, Looser reminds us that historical discourse in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries came in numerous forms and guises. Once we consider a more generous view of what constituted history writing in this period, we find "countless female-authored" texts "contributed to the development of history writing during the long eighteenth century" (p. 16). Women writers, according to Looser, fully participated in a struggle among generic forms, particularly history and fiction, for "authority, status, and readers" (p. 22). In each of her six chapters, Looser focuses on the discursive practices employed by her chosen women writers: how they mixed and manipulated generic combinations, engaged similar

male-authored texts, and responded to the demands of the reading market. She is also keenly interested in the reception of these texts—not only in their contemporaneous success or failure—but also in their legacies, particularly in the nineteenth century, as either classics or duds.

Among the Victorians, Lucy Hutchinson's *Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson* (ca. 1671, published 1806) certainly ranked as a classic. The *Memoirs* went through multiple editions, were abridged and extracted, and Hutchinson herself was celebrated as a national treasure, a learned woman who knew her proper place. But she was not seen as a historian; and the *Memoirs* were often classed as a work of fiction. Why this was the case is what intrigues Looser. Her chapter on Hutchinson is both an analysis of the *Memoirs'* historiographical contributions (making some important comparisons to the history writing of the duchess of Newcastle and the earl of Clarendon) and a study of their reception as a quasi-novel in the modern era.

Also lauded by the mid-nineteenth century were Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's "Turkish Embassy Letters" (1763), which went through thirty-one printings by

1853. In this chapter, Looser argues that Montagu's letters were highly influential, establishing both the "subject of women and cultural difference as worthy of study" (p. 88). Looser also sees Montagu as determined to justify her authority as a female historian. Much of this chapter is concerned with Montagu's treatment of Turkish women, particularly in her famous description of them lounging about a bath. Looser acknowledges the arguments of feminist and post-colonial scholars who have characterized Montagu as either extraordinarily Eurocentric or culturally enlightened. But her interest in this passage is how Montagu effectively removes Turkish women from historical time by portraying them as timeless and undifferentiated. By doing so, Montagu reinforces her own position as an appropriate female historian, rooted in (Western) time. While Looser's thesis here is intriguing, I found her comparison of Montagu's form to that of Bishop Burnet's highly influential *History of His Own Time* (1724 and 1734), though less developed, more valuable. Further contextual analysis of Montagu's generic style *vis-à-vis* her contemporaries, I think, would have been illuminating, particularly in light of Looser's claims for Montagu's significance.

The next three chapters concern Charlotte Lennox's *The Female Quixote* (1752), Catherine Macaulay's histories, and Hester Lynch Piozzi's bizarre *Retrospection* (1801). Looser portrays Lennox as a "protofeminist struggling to be heard in a patriarchal marketplace" (p. 188). Lennox creatively bent generic rules and fused fiction and historical discourse. Her appeal, according to Looser, was her ability to put women at the center of her narrative while maintaining their proper femininity. In her chapter on Piozzi, Looser examines the critical demise of Piozzi's bold attempt at world history. *Retrospection* was "almost universally disliked" (p. 169) upon its publication. Reviewers failed to grasp its generic innovations and condemned Piozzi as a chatty simpleton. Here a combination of the author's choice of genre and her own gender conspired to doom her historiographical efforts to the critic's dustbin. Looser believes that this was also the case in so far as Catherine Macaulay's attempt at epistolary history is concerned. Macaulay's *The History of England from the Revolution to the Present Time: In a Series of Letters to a Friend* (1778) has often been seen as the ninth volume of her *History of England from the Accession of James I* (1763-83). But unlike her earlier history, *The History in Letters* was a critical flop. Looser analyzes Macaulay's personal behavior, her so-called "Bath period," on the eve of the book's publication, and her rather ungainly use of the epistolary format. She argues, rightly

I think, that Macaulay "seriously misperceived the ways authorship and genre differed for women and at best she disregarded them" (p. 122). Once Macaulay's own behavior became a matter of public titillation, she lost her protection from misogynist assault and this, in combination with the staid style of the *The History in Letters*, led to its "critical devaluation and eventual posthumous disappearance" (p. 151). This is Looser's most engaging chapter.

While the material on Macaulay's life has certainly been covered before, Looser's artful style and keen analysis of Macaulay's generic risks make for fascinating reading. What is lacking, however, is a serious analysis of the political context in which Macaulay's republicanism was received. The political allegiances of Macaulay's critics are never investigated. Might there have been more reasons other than gender and genre to attack this high priestess of republicanism? Looser is wrong, I think, to describe Macaulay's national history as a "Whig corrective to Hume" (p. 123). There were many Whig responses to Hume (including Charles James Fox's own history of James II's reign). But any history that portrays the Glorious Revolution as an outright failure can hardly be labeled Whig. Macaulay was a maverick political thinker but because Looser fails to examine the content of Macaulay's history, rather than the simply the form, this part of the story is wanting. Looser concludes her book with a compelling look at Jane Austen's juvenilia, the *History of England*, and her novel *Northanger Abbey* (1798/1818). Although not exactly a historian, Austen, according to Looser, very self-consciously borrowed from historical genres in an attempt to marry the benefits of the supposedly experiential (masculine) value of history with the entertaining (feminine) value of fiction.

This is a highly intelligent book with much to recommend it. Looser's work here should attract at least two audiences: those interested in any one or more of the six women discussed (each chapter can stand alone) and those concerned with the development and practice of historical discourse in the early modern era. As a historian, I found myself wanting further evidence of claims of "influence" and "contributions." Looser's arguments are steeped in the current scholarship on each of these women, and she is a generous scholar who always gives credit where it is due. Some readers may find it disappointing that there is little analysis of the actual content of these women's writings, such as in the case of Catherine Macaulay. But be that as it may, Looser's focus is genre; that is her contribution, and she will have you

thinking about it as you never have before.

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