

Review: ***Women's Writing, 1660-1830: Feminisms and Futures***. Edited by Jennie Batchelor and Gillian Dow. London: Palgrave Macmillan. 2016. Pp 266. £89.99 (hardcover), ISBN 9781137543813.

'Feminisms and Futures' is a supremely fitting appellation for this [volume](#) of waypoints and landmarks. Born out of Chawton House Library's tenth anniversary conference in 2013, this collection of essays is self-consciously circumspect and candid in its assessment of feminist literary history. As Batchelor and Dow express in their introduction, the field is dynamic, progressive, and often contradictory. Since Chawton House Library's opening in 2003, the landscape of feminist literary study has matured and shifted. Both within and beyond the academy, the intervening years have seen feminist scholars tenaciously seek new ways to recover women's writings and reinforce women writers' cultural presence, from Adrienne Wadewitz's [Wikipedia edit-a-thons](#) and Caroline Criado-Perez's campaign to 'Keep a Woman' on English bank notes, to, alternatively, Marisa Fuentes' [work](#) on the lives of women of colour and the simultaneous presence and erasure of their voices within colonial archives. Yet, the systemic bias remains, and there is still much work to be done. The essays contained in *Women's Writing, 1660-1830* offer a crucial opportunity to pause, reflect, and assess the direction – or indeed multiple directions – in which feminist literary history is, could, and should be headed.

The urgent questions at the heart of this volume chiefly surround the 'recovery project' around women's writing. The query of whether the recovery project has 'achieved its goal' is quickly dissected and problematised. Instead of a simplistic and potentially dismissive and counter-productive call for work 'beyond recovery', Batchelor, Dow and their authors instead carve out a nuanced and diverse assemblage of avenues in which the voices of women writers and readers can continue to be accessed and studied. The introduction, as well as essays by Ros Ballaster, Katherine Binhammer, Isobel Grundy, and Dow, unflinchingly grapple with the potential for isolation or elitism within women's literary history as a distinct field. Indeed, the impact of scholarly work on the realities of higher education is valiantly approached: the exclusionary and unaffordable cost of editions of women's writing, the white, Anglo-centric nature of the field, and the teaching of women writers in the classroom.

Flanked by Grundy's preface and Cora Kaplan's postscript, the volume underscores the centrality of literary study to feminist scholarship. Grundy reiterates the ways in which women's writing continues to be a 'daring choice' (p. 9) for scholars to pursue, and sets a tone of boldness, scholarly, social, and pedagogical responsibility and intellectual rigour which carries through the volume. Ballaster's chapter on the place of the aesthetic navigates the place given to aesthetic judgement and the privileging of literary forms of writing, and opens up a key question throughout the volume: what counts as women's writing? Economics and professionalism are key issues within the volume, and their influence on how women's writing has traditionally been defined is nuanced within the essays. E. J. Clery raises the part played by neo-liberal ideology in shaping the study of women's writing and demonstrates the ways in which the economic is addressed in women's writing. M.O. Grenby considers the professionalisation of women's writing of children's literature and the economic valuation of writing by women. Batchelor's essay on anonymity grapples with the professional and amateur author, alongside the uncomfortable image of modesty, deference, and silence which surrounds works 'by a lady', or indeed the ungendered 'Anon'. Drawing from the wealth of 'Anon' work in periodicals such as the *Lady's Magazine*, Batchelor makes a convincing case for the

inclusion of such anonymous texts within the remit of women's writing. Similarly, Elaine McGirr further diversifies the parameters of the women writer through the performative utterances of Nell Gwynn and Susannah Arne Cribber.

Alongside who and what counts as women's writing, the frameworks and methodologies through which it is approached and taught are considered. Binhammer skilfully navigates the categorisation and signification of the women in women's writing, and makes a case for the need to marry eighteenth-century literature with feminist theory within pedagogical contexts. Marie-Louise Coolahan and Mark Empey interrogate book ownership and access in order to assess the impact of women's writing upon the make-up of libraries, deftly demonstrating how the 'neo-liberal university's appetite for quantification and empirical research' (p. 67) can be turned to fruitful ends in feminist literary scholarship. Chloe Wigston Smith challenges the notion that taking up the pen necessitates abandoning the needle, and reflects upon the relationship between material objects and their literary representations. Aligning feminine literary and material practices, Smith celebrates the feminist potential of the 'material turn'.

The geographical borders, and the crossing and interrogation of those boundaries, dominate the final two essays in the volume. Sarah Prescott tackles the persistent problems around the synonymous use of British for English, and the consequent exclusion of Scottish, Irish, and Welsh women's voices. The juncture of national identity and gender, and their impact upon differing notions of value and authorship, literary aesthetic, and professionalism, underline the importance of intersectional considerations. Opening out the conversation again to consider pan-European writing, Dow's chapter also turns to the mapping of women writers' lives. Noting that the dismissal of biography and bio-bibliographical surveys have been heavily scorned and dismissed, Dow brings the discussion back toward the so-called success of the recovery project.

One of the many impressive – but not explicitly highlighted – aspects of this book is the plethora of references to projects, databases and networks which have contributed to the study of women's literary history over the years. Coolahan and Empey's [\*Reception and Circulation of Early Modern Women's Writing, 1550-1700\*](#) informs their chapter, Prescott's [\*Women's Poetry from Scotland, Ireland, and Wales: 1400-1800\*](#) similarly informs her contribution, while the impact of [\*Orlando: Women's Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present\*](#) is mentioned by Ballaster, Clery and Binhammer alike. As Batchelor and Dow reflect in their introduction, the catch-all phrasing of a 'recovery project' is misleading in suggesting a cohesive, strategized, and unified movement. The essays in this volume reflect and embrace the diversity of projects, perspectives and approaches, even occasionally crossing disciplinary lines. Encompassing the professional and amateur, print and manuscript, the canonical and the overlooked and undervalued, Batchelor and Dow champion a vision for the future of feminist literary history which is both grounded in the realistic issues that abound in humanities scholarship, and refreshingly inclusionary.

**SERENA DYER**  
*De Montfort University*