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women's work: labour, gender, authorship, 1750–1830

Jennie Batchelor, Manchester University Press, Manchester, UK and New York, USA, 2010,
249 + x pp., ISBN: 978-0-7190-8257-3, £60.00 (Hbk)

Women's Work: Labour, Gender, Authorship, 1750–1830 is a most welcome contribution to the burgeoning scholarship on women's experiences of labour and economic agency. Here work is defined capaciously, but effectively, to denote 'various kinds of manual, intellectual and affective labour' (p. 11). Jennie Batchelor carefully demonstrates how 'work' could form a significant (and empowering) component of female subjectivity.

As Deborah Valenze has long established, the construction of female labour as a positive social good had considerable longevity across the long eighteenth century. Moreover, recent analyses of women's economic participation as businesswomen and investors have dramatically altered our understanding of the contours of female opportunity, and the scope for women to claim an identity as active economic agents. Batchelor is well versed in this revisionist scholarship and unites it successfully with the insights of literary studies, such as Cheryl Turner's study of the self-positioning of eighteenth-century female authors as professional writers.

The core of the book consists of three chapters each devoted to a separate author (Sarah Scott, Charlotte Smith and Mary Wollstonecraft). The strategy is to move beyond the empirical contextual landscape to reveal how these authors' own published texts variously validated notions of female labour. As Batchelor claims in the case of Scott, 'the texts claim that feminine sensibility and economic activity are not merely compatible but ideally linked' (p. 39). Throughout, Batchelor's story is nuanced through attention to broader literary and cultural developments that entailed reconceptualisations of the relationship between manual and intellectual labour. It is a subtle analysis that traces the comparative salience of her theme across different texts, being attentive to the twists and modifications in the oeuvre of each of her subjects.

The final chapter comprises an investigation into the female applications to the Literary Fund. This enables us to move beyond the big names of the first three chapters, to excavate the voices and aspirations of a wealth of little-known and often forgotten female writers. Founded in 1790, the purpose of the Literary Fund was to provide financial aid to impecunious authors. Batchelor teases out carefully the gendered performances of female

applicants to the fund. These women were sensitive to the need to position themselves as upright maternal or domestic figures. Yet, as Batchelor argues, such performances could also be the foundation for more assertive identities concerning their utility as 'exemplary mothers' to contribute to contemporary cultural dialogue. While sensitive to the ambiguities that were often enmeshed within women's attitudes to work and the self, 'domestic ideology' might nonetheless function as a resource through which women could lay claim to wider public recognition and import.

These perspectives allow Batchelor to deliver some refreshing readings of such canonical texts as Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. While the argument that virtuous industry was essential to the discourse of the radical female polemicists of the 1790s is not new, the case is pursued with especial vigour here, invigorated by Batchelor's attention to the mutable—and often empowering—languages of labour in this context.

The book is billed as a text that covers the years 1750–1830. The post-1800 period gets quite short shrift, however. It would have been interesting to see how the emergent issues of the 1820s, and in particular the proliferation of reforming and didactic literature and the continuing rise of female specialist authors in the fields of science and political economy, play into Batchelor's claims. Indeed, the substantive case is made from a rather select range of authors and genres, and the analysis treads fairly lightly over such matters as religious and political affiliation. Nonetheless, a larger book may not have been able to deliver such dense, intricately constructed arguments, and, like all good books, it simply raises further questions. I suspect it is not destined for reading lists much below those of advanced undergraduates on specialist courses. However, it is a book that repays careful reading. It illuminates important but neglected features of the literary marketplace and women's negotiation of the theme of labour within it. Above all, it is a book in which the synergy between new historical scholarship and literary analysis works exceptionally well.

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