

'Women Writers and the Edinburgh Enlightenment' by Pam Perkins

Review by Andrew Monnickendam

Women Writers and the Edinburgh Enlightenment is the fifteenth book in the SCROLL (Scottish Cultural Review of Language and Literature) series. The first volume, published in 2004, was *Scotland and Theory*, followed by others on a whole variety of subjects such as the Kailyard, J.M. Barrie, masculinity, and medieval romance. All feature a striking picture on the cover, in this case, a Raeburn portrait of a pensive Mrs. Oswald with a book in her hands, which would match the title and content of Pam Perkins' monograph.



However, the slightly askance glance of the sitter possibly suggests sadness rather than philosophical consolation, and disappointment rather than fulfilment. This ambivalence might have resulted from reading the blurb on the back cover which informs us that the book we have in our hands “provides an overview of women in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Edinburgh literary world. Its main focus is on the careers of three women—Elizabeth Hamilton, Anne Grant, and Christian Isobel Johnstone [...]” My quibble is with the work “overview”, which arguably is a disservice to the author and her method. For Pam Perkins' study is the farthest possible remove from a survey based, as it is, in part on valuable archive work and in part on rigorous analysis of the text she discusses.

The introductory chapter, with its witty title, “Excellent women and not too blue”—the blue in question here is the blue-stocking—hones in on the subject of cultural authority as it affects the role of the woman writer. As Perkins states, if the question of whether women had a Renaissance is a widely debated one, what should we say about women and the Enlightenment, or, if we want to be more precise, women and the Edinburgh Enlightenment? To associate Scottish females as primarily songstresses (and later novelists) or the capital city as a centre for

what is commonly called “cultural production” leads not necessarily to the opening up of the Athens of the North but to its becoming what one contemporary labelled “the Birmingham of literature”; in short, the presence of female writers in culture is not just a quantitative issue but also a qualitative one. On the one hand, as she argues, there might well be a quasi-salon society in which women could participate, but all that is positive in that respect has to be set beside the recurrent “remasculinisation of literary culture”—which makes its presence felt in the antipathy to sentimentalism—instigated by Walter Scott, and all that follows on from the division between mind and feeling, public and private, highbrow and other brows.

If there is one person whose literary persona, work and thought sets her at complete odds to this heavily gendered agenda it has to be Elizabeth Hamilton, as evident in the highly appreciative obituaries published at her death, particularly one penned by Maria Edgeworth for the Times; in contrast, Jane Austen’s passing away received scarce attention outside her immediate circle: Hamilton is definitely a mould-breaker. Pam Perkins has already edited *The Cottagers of Glenburnie* for the ASLS, so it is interesting to read her appreciation that even this domestic tale is hallmarked by “Hamilton’s unapologetic immersion in the moral philosophy of [Dugald] Stewart and others.” On a personal level, the most interesting Hamilton work turns out to be *Memoirs of Agrippina, Wife of Germanicus* (1804), its context, with certain reverberations of revolutionary France, promotes it as a tale where many perennial conflicts are set out: classicism against romanticism, male figures and power—Tiberius and Germanicus—pitted against her powers of persuasion, motherhood and family loyalties and so on. Much in the line of Wollstonecraft, the absence of Christianity stands in the way of making Agrippina a role model for Hamilton’s contemporaries.

The next chapter concentrates on Anne Grant, and is particularly lucid in its account of *Letters from the Mountains* (1806). Perhaps the word “mountains” is in itself sufficient to draw our attention not only to perceptions of the Highlands but to assumptions both of those who write about them and those who read their accounts. Surely, few, if any questions are more controversial than the status of the Highlands as a metonym of Scottish national identity. Perkins makes a well-grounded but possibly controversial claim: “there is no question that in addition to being a tale of highland life and travels, it also offers a narrative in which the

central figure establishes her voice and identity as an artist", in other words it just falls short of becoming a *Künstlerroman*. Grant's individual touches are noticeable in her role as outsider and insider at the same time, in the motif of motherhood and loss, and in her vision of the Highlands not as primitive or ancestral but forming an atemporal world. This is all a long way from Ossian, Johnson and Boswell.

The next chapter discusses the life of the enigmatic Christian Isobel Johnstone. Making excellent use of the Oliver and Boyd archive and other research material, Perkins has managed to provide new information about her early career and her divorce, a judicial process which was not as rare an occurrence as commonly believed. This is also the first time that the figure of her husband, John Johnstone, comes out of the shadows, in part through his wife's lack of interest in the business side of her journalistic career at *Tait's* and several other Edinburgh journals. Thus we find another typical Johnstone paradox: a professional writer uninterested in what precisely makes her a professional. Of the several conclusions Perkins reaches, perhaps the most significant is about her readership. As is the case of other scholars who have studied Johnstone, she is keenly aware of the constant switching between different genres, how fiction becomes didactic, how didactic writings turn into fiction, and so on. Perkins states that "her work assumes that the sort of—presumably female—readers who would be attracted to gentle comedies of middle-class manners would also be interested in the political discussions of class that were being carried on elsewhere in *Tait's*." This is surely one of the most difficult conceptual barriers to break down. The study concludes with a short account of Margaret Oliphant, a figure whose career, writing, but above all her critical reception, is prefigured by this turn-of-the-century trio.

This volume must contain a certain degree of vindication, as all writers hover on the margins of acceptability within the academy without having full membership. It is surely difficult to imagine that we would be so interested in the literary quality of their work without the impact of feminism on literary studies. However, Perkins is keenly aware that one of the consequences of a gendered approach is to imprison criticism within similar parameters to those which Hamilton, Grant and Johnstone simultaneously felt uncomfortable about but at the same time used, and dare we say, manipulated for their own benefit. Why not? Perkins develops her arguments from this situation, giving a highly informative account of each individual professional writer and their work which necessarily brings us back to

discussion about the role of the woman writer in Scotland, but extends far beyond into those basic questions of family, community, religion, Highlands and Lowlands, education that dominate literature of the time. Perkins' study shows that not only is our view of Romantic-century Scottish culture incomplete without these three figures, but that Romantic-century literature is notably lopsided without them.

References & Further Information

Women Writers and the Edinburgh Enlightenment by Pam Perkins is published by Rodopi as part of the SCROLL series, 2010.

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precise, women and the Edinburgh Enlightenment? To associate Scottish females as primarily songstresses (and later novelists) or the capital city as a centre for what is commonly called “cultural production” leads not necessarily to the opening up of the Athens of the North but to its becoming what one contemporary labelled “the Birmingham of literature”; in short, the presence of female writers in culture is not just a quantitative issue but also a qualitative one. On the one hand, as she argues, there might well be a quasi-salon society in which women could participate, but all that is positive in that respect has to be set beside the recurrent “remasculinisation of literary culture”—which makes its presence felt in the antipathy to sentimentalism—instigated by Walter Scott, and all that follows on from the division between mind and feeling, public and private, highbrow and other brows.

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