Introduction: ‘Scottish Women Writers and the Novel before 1900’

By Rivka Swenson

The following four essays were developed from papers that were presented by their authors in January, 2018, at the annual meeting of Modern Language Association, in New York City, on the Scottish Literature Forum panel, which I chaired during my last year of service on the Scottish executive committee.

Back in 2017, when the committee conceived of the panel topic, we settled on a generically expansive title: ‘Scottish Women Writers before 1900’. What we envisioned was a panel that would feature an array of short arguments and meditations on examples from diverse genres. As it turned out, we did receive a number of strong proposals on diverse topics, but there were four proposals on novels (three of them nineteenth-century ones) that promised to work together so engagingly that I simply could not pass up the chance to enable that mutually energizing conversation. The title of this Supplement reflects the happy outcome, then, with the insertion of three delimiting words: and the novel. The essays that follow are each correctively groundbreaking. Separately and together, Caroline McCracken-Flesher, JoEllen DeLucia, Anne Stapleton, and Juliet Shields significantly advance the important project of recognizing Scottish contributions, and in particular Scottish women’s contributions, to the history of the novel and to the history of literature more generally; indeed, as Juliet Shields elucidates in the culminating, high-stakes essay that concludes this Supplement, hundreds upon hundreds of novels alone await our critical eye.

McCracken-Flesher’s essay tacitly describes the state of the field and what we can and ought to change within the house of literary history. Specifically, McCracken-Flesher plumbs the dynamic between Walter Scott’s Abbotsford, its guests, and its inhabitants. Examining the texts that surround Abbotsford, such as guest books and letters (from inhabitants and visitors alike) and biographies, the essay describes how the documentary record has resisted making manifest the presence of women at Abbotsford, including the presence of women writers who visited. Illuminating the de facto ghosting of Scott’s wife along with Joanna

Baillie, Susan Ferrier, Maria Edgeworth, and those who visited after Scott's death (e.g., Charlotte Brontë, Harriet Beecher Stowe), McCracken-Flesher shows how male writers displaced women and, indeed, how dogs were celebrated over daughters. The essay reminds us implicitly of ongoing problems and gaps in the discourse, absences in the architecture, even as it performs a sensitive correction.

DeLucia's essay about Jean Marishall's 1760s sentimental fiction enacts a focused corrective to the major critical misprision that the late eighteenth century was bereft of Scottish women writers or contributors to novel tradition. Zooming in carefully on Marishall, the essay describes a versatile writer who was read by major Scottish Enlightenment figures even as she explored their ideas across different genres. DeLucia opens a window especially onto Marishall's novel *The History of Miss Clarinda Cathcart and Miss Fanny Renton* (1766), her specific approach to the sentimental tradition, and her engagement with Reid, Hume, Smith, and Kames. At the same time, DeLucia gestures invitingly to the range of Marishall's other writing: her philosophical and pedagogical writing (and her bold critique of Lord Chesterfield's educational system), her periodical writing, her children's titles, her dramatic writing.

Like DeLucia, Stapleton focuses in on a lucky target: novelist Margaret Todd, writing a century after DeLucia's Marishall. Todd, like her contemporaries Robert Louis Stevenson and Arthur Conan Doyle, had something to say about medical topics. As well she might, being one of the first students to study at the Edinburgh School of Medicine for Women. Todd's novel *Mona Maclean Medical Student* (1894) demystifies dissection (at length!), while promoting the radical notion that women are well-suited both for studying anatomy and caring for patients; indeed, the novel performs, in prose, the very well-suitedness it describes. Incorporating personal experiences into this three-volume treatment of an eponymous protagonist's travails, and providing an appealing recuperation of dissection after the cultural horrors of Burke and Hare, Todd achieves a double goal: she positions women as capable students and physicians, and she positions herself as a capable physician-novelist.

Moving back outward, Shields, like McCracken-Flesher in the essay that opens this Supplement, considers the problem of absences and gaps upon the critical field of Scottish literary history at large. Shields shines light on Margaret Oliphant, under-served in the history of the novel, compared to her English counterparts, but also outward, to the number of exceedingly prolific Scottish

women novelists who surrounded her within the nineteenth century and for whom she helped pave the way as a *Blackwood's* writer for upwards of four decades. As prolific as Oliphant was, she was not exceptional as such, even if a masculinist trajectory of Scottish literary history has forgotten her sister-colleagues. Astonishingly, Henrietta Kettie, Lucy Bethia Walford, Isabella Fyvie Mayo, Flora Annie Steel, and Annie Shepard Swan wrote more than four hundred novels between them. Shields is shrewdly convincing that this ignored but industrious body of middle-class Free-Church Presbyterians, with their fantastic outpouring of realist fiction, deserves scrutiny. The stakes are high, as no fundamental understanding of the recent rediscovered 'Scottish Victorianism' is possible without it.

There is still so much more to say, and I note with excitement that these four essays not only comprise signal accomplishments in and of themselves, each one also points to further avenues for exploration. And, as I mentioned earlier, we received still other striking proposals for the 2018 panel—the lot of which was quite heterogeneous. There were genuinely stimulating abstracts for intriguing, under-treated topics, Anne Grant's lifelong work as a coterie poet and Margaret Oliphant's literary journalism among them. Therefore, I want to emphasize that while groundbreaking work is being done on early Scottish women novelists, rich stores of material are also currently being developed on pre-1900 and even pre-1800 Scottish women's writing beyond the novel. But, as it was, at the 2018 conference, the clock ran over and conversations about novels continued into the hall (and, for some, into the night at the social event hosted by the International Association for the Study of Scottish Literature).

Looking forward, I have no doubt that any future MLA sessions on contiguous under-explored topics (whether proposed by the Forum committee or simply by individual members of the MLA) would provide a boon to additional fresh work: I can well imagine a panel on 'Scottish Women's Pre-1800 Writing', for instance, or on 'Scottish Women's Nineteenth-Century Writing Beyond the Novel', with papers on Mary Hamilton's eighteenth-century novels, Margaret Maclean Clephane's nineteenth-century manuscript poetry, Mary Coke's eighteenth-century journals and letters, the totality of Helen Maria Williams's dual-century and multi-genre writing career … but I digress. Meanwhile, it is to be hoped that the anticipated publication of capacious tomes such as *The Edinburgh Biographical Dictionary of Scottish Writers* (eds. McCracken-Flesher and Alan Riach) and *The Cambridge*

Guide to the Eighteenth-Century Novel (ed. April London), will serve, like the field-shaping, ongoing work of the four scholars whose essays are featured in this Supplement, to bring needed attention to the delicious and somewhat neglected range of pre-1900s Scottish, and pre-1900s Scottish women's, writing.

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